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# Family Therapist Connecting and Building Relationships with Substance Abusers in the Seminole Tribe of Florida: An Ethnographic Study

Sunny Nelli Khachatryan

Nova Southeastern University, [sk853@nova.edu](mailto:sk853@nova.edu)

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Family Therapist Taking an Anthropologist Approach with the Members of the Seminole Tribe  
of Florida

By  
Sunny Khachatryan

A Dissertation Presented to  
The School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctoral of Philosophy

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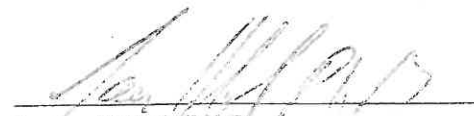
This dissertation was submitted by Sunny Khachatryan under the direction of the chair of the dissertation listed below. It was submitted to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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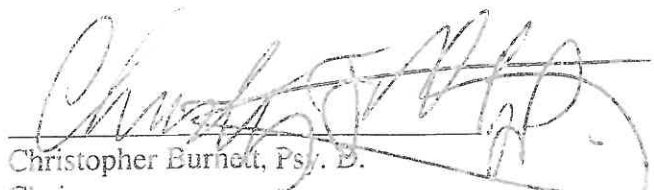
Approved:

  
Christopher Burnett, Psy. D.  
Chair

  
Shelley K. Green, Ph.D.

  
James Hibbel, Ph.D.

8/19/15  
Date of Final Approval

  
Christopher Burnett, Psy. D.  
Chair



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### Abstract

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine the process of a family therapist entering and then navigating the cultural system of working with substance abusing Seminole tribal clients. The study also utilized two tribal members sharing their opinions about how Seminoles view therapy. As noted in the interview questions and responses, the research presented guidelines for family therapists to follow when working with tribal members. Because there has been no study conducted with family therapists providing clinical services to tribal members, this study introduced tools for clinicians to keep in mind and utilize when working with tribal clients.

The interviews illustrated what specific routes therapists may take with tribal clients in order to join and connect. This study provided the field of family therapy an opportunity to become familiar with the Seminole tribe, and guidelines of how to remain mindful when working with this unique population. These results were supplemented by the researcher providing personal reflections on her experiences with tribal clients.

Keywords: Seminole Tribe of Florida, ethnography, navigating a foreign system



## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

June 4, 2013, the new hired family therapist walked through the doors of John's Place, a substance abuse treatment center. She was dressed in all black pencil skirt, with a black blouse, and black Gucci pumps. As she begin to walk towards the CEO's office for instructions on her first day at work, her heart beat increased and her anxiety became her enemy. She was getting ready to receive guidelines and instructions from her supervisor and CEO regarding her role as a family therapist working with the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The CEO begins the meeting by introducing the mission statement of John's Place. "John's Place mission is to provide Comprehensive, Quality Addiction Treatment Services exclusively to the Seminole Tribe of Florida."

The CEO informed the new hired family therapist that she needed to memorize the mission statement by the next day as he proceeded with the meeting. The meeting consisted of five individuals who formed a strong team at John's Place. Around the table, the CEO sat at the head of the table surrounded by the clinical director, the case manager, the program coordinator, and the new hired family therapist who was excited, but yet so nervous. The meeting continued on with morning meditation. Each team member was required every morning to take turns to read a message from a book written by Iyanla Vanzant, named "Until Today," and reflect on the message for the day. Morning meditation during staffing meeting was all new to the family therapist, however it was a flattering and intimate experience. The family therapist was given the opportunity to reflect on the reading, she shared her love for God and her desire to get closer to her higher power. The team appeared to be focused on spirituality and providing quality services to the Seminole Tribe.

During the meeting, the family therapist listened carefully to her new team and took notes to assist her on remembering what needed to be completed before the day was over. The morning meeting lasted for thirty minutes, as soon as it was 9:00 a.m., six clients rushed through the front door and stared at the new family therapist. The clients begin to introduce themselves to the family therapist, however they were hesitant to shake her hand. The family therapist introduced herself with a soft voice attempting to reach to the clients with interest. Anxiety and nervousness continued to take control of the family therapist who presented herself as if she was confident and calm. The more the family therapist attempted to fight through her anxiety and nervousness, the more she became anxious and nervous. According to Flemons (2002), “Attaching *no* to unwanted thoughts, feelings, memories, behaviors, and so on never eliminates them from your experience, rather, it ensures their continued presence and importance” (p. 11). The battle between anxiety created a relationship between the unwanted things. A desired idea of separation is bringing the unwanted things closer to an individual (Flemons, 2002).

*Systemic Family Therapist working with the Seminole Tribe*

I of course was that newly hired family therapist. I wanted to get to know the clients, however I was told by my clinical team to take it slowly and allow the clients to approach me since they had trust issues especially with non-tribal members, who they referred to as outsiders. I was compassionate to engage with my new clients, but did not want to rush the process. According to Flemons (2002), “Compassion plunges us inside our clients’ experiences, providing the means for full bodied, empathetic entry into their pain, it allows us to imaginatively feel ourselves as them” (p. 47). My goal of was to be compassionate about my clients’ lives however, I realized that I was an outsider to my clients and I needed to do my best to provide active listening and allow my clients to approach me at their own pace. The six clients

continued to stare at me with interest to wanting to know my role at John's Place. The six clients appeared to study me by looking at me up and down and paying close attention to my eyes and to the sound of my voice. I politely introduced myself as the family therapist and waited patiently for any response from them. As they watched me, I watched them closely. There were three female clients and three male clients, all with long straight black hair coming down past their shoulders. All of their bodies were heavy set, with tattoos all over, and red skin complication. Around the necks of each were bead necklaces formed by four colors which appeared to be the Seminole Tribe's medicine colors, red, yellow, black, and white. I continued to wait for a response with an awkward silence that took control of the room. As I was getting ready to sprinkle some conversation to dismiss the awkward silence among us, I noticed one of the female clients walked towards me. I faced her with a smile and prepared myself for the unknown conversation. The female client asked me a specific question, she stated, "Are you in recovery?" It was obvious that she was challenging my expertise. I was stuck for a moment because I did not know what the correct answer was at that moment, I replied, "No, I am not." Here I was first day at work, not only an outsider, but also not in recovery. Two strikes at once. What was going to strike me out with these Seminole clients? I became more anxious and begin to doubt myself as a family therapist. I was not sure if I was going to be able to provide therapy services to the clients who viewed me as not qualified. Well, according to me, I felt as if I was not qualified because at that moment being challenged by the client I begin to feel as if I did not belong in that setting. I was not in recovery, I did not know if the clients were going to take me seriously, I was a 27 years old non-tribal woman with some experience in the substance abuse treatment field, and my confidence was at its lowest peak. Why was I not confident in my profession? Why was I so hard on myself?

My anxiety was getting the best out of me and allowing me to feel like I was a victim lost in the world. I dismissed myself politely from the clients and walked to my supervisor's office. As I approached my supervisor's door, I wanted to faint due to my mixed emotions, I was embarrassed about being challenged by a client. I wanted to receive guidance from the expert, who worked with the Seminole Tribe for four years. He looked at me and asked me if I was okay? I replied with a nervous voice, "I think so." I informed my supervisor that I was challenged by a client and I was not sure if I handled the question appropriately. I was instructed to remain humble with the clients and not defend myself because at the end of the day it is was not about me, it is about the clients. He stated, "When a client asks you if you are in recovery, reply by telling the client that I cannot teach you how to get high, but I can teach you how to stay clean." I walked out of his office straight to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and bring myself back to reality at my first day at John's Place. It is my first day at work with a new culture and it only made sense for my clients to ask me specific questions. They were curious about me just as I was about them. I needed to slow down get in touch with my anxiety and continue on with my day. I was determined to complete my first day with success and that was to learn something about the Seminole Tribe.

My brief supervision provided me a sense of relief by allowing me to become comfortable with who I am as a therapist and not get discouraged because I am not in recovery. Working with the Seminole Tribe is a unique world. However, working with Seminoles in a substance abuse treatment setting is a world within itself. I was preparing myself to get ready for a rollercoaster knowing that I have motion sickness. It was my first time meeting individuals from the Seminole Tribe. I did not know anything about the Seminole culture, therefore, as a family therapist, I was willing to take the role as an anthropologist in order to attempt to get

close to my new Seminole clients. I knew it was going to be a journey within itself, since I was an outsider. Informed by my staff, the Seminole culture did not like outsiders and they remained close to the Seminole Tribe not wanting to welcome non-tribal members. It was going to be a challenge for me, not only to get to know the clients, but also to get to know the Seminole culture. I was entering a new world, where I needed to be prepared to get rejected, but yet continue to give my best effort because I wanted to change lives of individuals who were suffering from alcohol and drug addictions.

My official role was to be a systemic family therapist working with individuals who were struggling with alcohol and substance abuse, however my first day at work I realized that in order for me to be a therapist to my clients I had to take a different approach, which was to begin my process as an anthropologist in order to understand the Seminole culture before I can be affective as a therapist. How can I begin to understand my clients and their behaviors if I was so foreign to the Seminole culture? How can I connect with my clients if I do not know anything about the Seminole Tribe? Therefore, I needed to understand the Seminole culture from an up close and personal experience, which was placing my role in my client's lives from a non-expert stance and becoming open-minded to study the Seminole culture (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). According to Milton Erickson (as cited in Nelson & Thomas) "As the job of the therapist to meet the client is his or her own world rather than to try to work from or to impose elements of the therapist's world" (p. 27). Taking the non-expert stance with the Seminole Tribe allowed me to understand that the clients were the experts of their own situations, it was important for me to realize that my clients knew best what situations fit accordingly to their lives (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). I was getting an opportunity with the Seminole Tribe to not only interact with tribal members, but to also provide guidance to the clients to live a drug free life, and inform clients on

addiction education. I was also blessed enough to get a chance to take a journey with the Seminole culture based on my clients' pace. I was ready, nervous, and excited for this journey with the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

*Family Therapist taking an Anthropologist Role*

Taking an anthropologist approach with my clients, I was going to study the Seminole culture and understand the meaning behind the tribe based on interactions with my clients in a substance abuse treatment setting. According to Richard Robbins (2006), "From an anthropological perspective, members of a society view the world a similar way because they share the same culture; people differ in how they view the world because their culture differ" (p. 4). In order to help my clients, I needed to understand their culture in depth in order to be effective with my therapeutic interventions. In such an anthropological approach, an ethnographic method is applied in order to explore and understand the lives of the individuals being studied (Robbins, 2006, p. 15). According to Robbins (2006),

"But the unique feature of cultural anthropology is the application of the ethnographic method, the immersion of investigators in the lives of the people they are trying to understand and, through that experience, the attainment of some level of understanding of the meanings those people ascribe to their existence" (p.15).

This ethnography is an illustration of a collaborative work between the "outsider" therapist and the Seminole clients.

Writing ethnography gives me the opportunity to challenge myself in the presence of my clients by reaching for knowledge about the Seminole Tribe. It gives me the feeling of taking an initiative and getting in depth with my clients' lives to become part of their world. According to

Robbins (2006), “the ethnographic method transforms the fieldworker into a “marginal” person, an outsider who knows only something of what it is to be an insider” (p. 36).

It gives me the motivation to ask myself what else can I learn from my clients and how it will benefit the therapeutic relationship. As a researcher I must set aside my own views of how things should be and view the world of the Seminole Tribe in a new way (Robbins, 2006). My journey with the Seminole Tribe allowed me to understand the culture and how they live different from my own (Robbins, 2006).

### *Language Creates Meaning to Experience*

“What do I know? And how do I know it?” With these simple questions acting as a catalyst I investigated and found meaningful answers, life itself is based on perceptions and distinctions. The idea of “epistemology,” is both how you know, and how you think you know things. However, thinking about thinking can be a challenge within itself (Keeney, 1983, p. 13). Based on life interactions epistemology is a significant concept that lives in relations with the mind. Therefore knowledge is connected with the mind, in which the mind is joined to its’ surroundings with interactions (Bateson, 1972). Using these interactions, I discovered meaningful ideas and events that I connect with. It is important to remember that realities are created socially through language by illustrating that there are no essential truth (Freedman and Combs, 1996, p. 22). If I were not able to interact, I am not sure how I would be able to experience events with my clients. According to William Carlos Williams (as cited in Flemons, 1991), “A new world is only a new mind” (p. 64). Receiving information is an ongoing process and every time there is new information introduced there is a new world created.

In my role with the Seminole Tribe was significant to focus on the language among my clients and me during therapeutic sessions. According to Edward Sapir (as cited in Robbins,

2006), “specific languages serve not only as a medium for communication, but also to define and guide our perception of experience” (p. 117). Information is introduced to cultures through language. Language can be changed based on context. According to Bateson (1972) without context there is no meaning, context happens in the world of information. Becvar and Becvar (1999) described context as a meaning an individual experiences through a specific situation (p. 19). With my clients, I realized that in order to communicate with them to a level where they felt comfortable to respond, I needed to utilize simple vocabulary words because of their education level. Within the Seminole Tribe, the amount of middle school and high school dropouts is extremely high. From the six clients that I met on my first day at work, none of the clients were high school graduates. Having this information about the Seminole culture allowed me to become aware that I needed to be selective with my vocabulary when speaking to my clients because I did not want to lose them in a conversation before it even started. According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988), “It is in language that we are able to maintain meaningful human contact with each other and through which we share a reality” (p. 377).

### *Social Constructionism & Postmodernism*

Kenneth Gergen is an influential constructionist who dedicated his time and effort by exploring relational meaning and providing an influence in the development of social constructionism (Gergen, 2006). Social constructionism strands from a postmodern view illustrating interactions carried on by dialogues among individuals (Gergen, 2009). It involves interactions among social relationships constructing ideas and creating meaning (Gergen, 2009, p. 2). For instance, in the process of having a conversation with a client, together we are constructing our realities or a world that makes sense to us. We are making assumptions based on our relationships. Through interaction with others, new meanings are being discovered and



ideas contributed (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 22). According to Gergen (2009) “In a broader sense, we may say that as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live” (p. 4). I believe that social realities are constructed through language such as ideas and metaphors (Gergen, 2009, p. 25).

According to Freedman & Combs (1996) postmodernist, “Focus on how the language that we use constitutes our world and beliefs” (p. 28). In other words, it is in language, which is constructed by societies that develops a vision reality (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 28). My understanding of postmodernism is that my reality is my reality, however others can have many possibilities of what reality means for them. Postmodernism consists of viewing situations from a “not knowing” stance (Freedman and Combs, 1996). Freedman and Combs (1996) state, “Adopting a postmodern, narrative, social constructionist worldview offers useful ideas about how power, knowledge, and “truth” are negotiated in families and larger cultural aggregations (p. 22). In the world of postmodernism, words that individuals are familiar with are through the process of sharing within language (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 28).

### *Journey in the Postmodern World*

The original developers of narrative therapy, in the 1980s, were Michael White and David Epston (Freedman & Comb, 1996). The two defined the process of the model as exploring the story of an individual’s life through metaphors and a non-blaming approach to the individuals and the problems they encounter (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Narrative therapy is a respectful approach to counseling that views people as experts of their own lives; it is important to get to know the person outside of the problem (Freedman & Comb, 1996). Narrative therapy is a unique approach of reflection utilized with clients in order to take a journey with them to explore stories that are meaningful by allowing clients to voice their stories and by carefully listening to

their shared stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This approach allows an opportunity for people to tell their stories in order to allow them to share their lived experiences. It is imperative to be reminded that as humans, we are meaning-making people born into stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In order for us to make meaning, we must interpret our experiences (White, 1991). White (1991) stated,

“Interpretation of experience is the narrative or story that provides the primary frame for this interpretation, for the activity or meaning-making; that it is through the narratives or the stories that persons have about their own lives and the lives of others that they make sense of their experience” (p. 123).

### *Narrative Therapy*

Narrative therapy demonstrates its ideas from a not-knowing stance, illustrating an attitude of curiosity and always being informed by the client (White, 2003, p. 24). Narrative therapists utilize a not-knowing stance that allows them to become curious, listen, and ask questions, believing that therapists never know their client’s experiences. Through the curiosity of the therapists, unique outcomes are brought to the attention of the person, allowing the formation of an alternative story. These stories are developed through conversations (White, 2007). Applying narrative therapy with my Seminole clients was significant because it opened up pathways for me to become closer to their life stories. According to Freedman & Combs (1996) “Deconstruction questions help people unpack their stories or see them from a different perspective so that they have been constructed becomes apparent” (p. 121). Narrative therapists facilitate and clarify what the person is sharing. Experiences are interpreted and linked as a series of events (Freedman & Comb, 1996). The series of events can be linked through a theme to define a story (White, 1990).

### *Beauty of Listening and Externalizing*

According to White (1990), “By achieving this separation from the problem-saturated description of life, from this habitual reading of the dominant story, persons are more able to identify unique outcomes” (p. 16). The process of viewing the problem as separate is known as externalizing (Freedman & Combs, 1996). I interpret the process as, the problem snuck into the person’s life (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The process of externalizing and defining unique outcomes leads to an alternative story (White, 1990, p. 16). White’s (2002) description of externalizing relates to illustrating “the extent to which these conversations can contribute to the unpacking of people’s negative identity conclusions- which I often refer to as thin conclusions” (p. 124). Clients accomplish this by engaging in externalizing conversations about personal negative identity conclusions (White, 2002, p. 124).

My outlook on narrative therapy is that it allows people the opportunity to view their stories from different perspectives by defining “sparkling moments” and everything that is influenced within the stories give meanings to things that people say (White, 1990). I believe one of the most important aspects of narrative therapy is to listen, because through the listening process, conversations are formed in therapy by how the people will understand their stories and how the therapist will listen to “people’s stories as stories” (Hibel, 2010, p. 52). Deconstruction listening is a powerful technique used in narrative therapy that allows individual’s stories to be heard from an accepting and understanding stance (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 46). Externalizing illustrates the idea of the problem being separate from the individual (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 47). According to Freedman and Combs (1996), “externalization is a practice supported by the belief that a problem is something operating or impacting on or pervading a person’s life, something separate and different from the person” (p. 47). I believe that narrative

therapy is formed with many wonderful skills that allow clients to discover new meanings and gives them the opportunity to construct their situations through the work of the therapist by utilizing deconstructive listening, externalizing, and approaching from a not-knowing stance (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Based on my systemic family therapy background, I was able to utilize variety of theories with my clients in connection with my anthropologist approach. Narrative therapy was significant because it allowed me to explore different life stories with my clients. Another theory that was helpful was Solution Focused Brief Therapy, which connected well with individuals who are in substance abuse treatment setting allowing clients to focus on the solutions.

### *Solution Focused Brief Therapy*

Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) was developed by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). SFBT has been influenced by Milton Erickson through his ideas of assuming that people have resources within their life experiences (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). SFBT connects with Erickson's concept that it is not necessary to focus on deficits, but rather one could work with the idea of what helped people to change (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). According to Erickson (as cited in Nelson & Thomas), "He saw it as the job of the therapist to meet the client in his or her own world rather than to try to work from or to impose elements of the therapist's world" (p. 27).

SFBT ideas originate from Gregory Bateson and members of the Mental Research Institute, including Dick Fisch, John Weakland, and Paul Watzlawick, who provided ideas relating to communication and cybernetics (De Jong & Berg, 2008, p. 11). I believe the process of SFBT involved curiosity, respect, being tentative, and nonpathologizing (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). SFBT holds some assumptions that relate to being aware that "change is part of living"

because individuals cannot prevent themselves from changing (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). SFBT practitioners are aware that people come with “resources and strengths,” and it is essential to create a setting for these to become “important and...identified” (Nelson & Thomas, 2007, p. 11).

SFBT is a future based theory working towards solutions that best fit the client’s reality (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). According to Nelson & Thomas (2007), “SFBT assumes that clients are the experts about their own situations, that the therapists can never have certainty in their knowledge of clients’ experiences, and that clients are the only ones who can know which solutions are best for them” (p. 12). In the world of SFBT, the problem is not the focus, the approach is to “identify and amplify potential solutions” rather than diagnosing and trying to repair, which relates to problem talk (Nelson & Thomas, 2007, p. 12). Within SFBT, a problem does not have to be related to the solution. Since there is no problem talk, the practitioner aims to get straight to solutions by guiding people to search for solutions that already exist in the people’s lived experiences (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). I believe SFBT allows people to view many possibilities that their lives can have. According to de Shazer (as cited in Nelson & Thomas, 2007), “Some things are situations, not problems” (p. 14).

#### *Exception, Scaling, and the Miracle Question*

The practices of SFBT consist of exception, scaling and the miracle question, which illustrate the concept of viewing life without the problem (Nelson & Thomas, 2007). According to De Jong and Kim Berg (2008), “solution-building practitioners use information about exceptions to help clients devise strategies that solve or reduce their problems” (p. 17). De Jong and Kim Berg (2008) describe scaling questions as “a practitioner can help clients to express complex, intuitive observations about their past experiences and estimates of future possibilities”

(p. 106). The miracle question is a technique used to allow clients to think of possibilities and changes they would like to experience (De Jong & Kim Berg, 2008, 84). Exception questions allow clients to think of times when the problem was less severe and what were some past solutions that worked that they can do more of. Scaling questions give clients the opportunity to identify differences on a range of a scale and develop goals from it. The miracle question is a tool used to guide clients to view the future where the problem is no longer present (Nelson & Thomas, 2007).

### *The Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to explore gaps in research about the Seminole Tribe of Florida. When I was first hired at John's Place, which is a private substance abuse treatment center providing services exclusively to the Seminole Tribe, I was told that there is not much information on the Seminole culture. I became aware that the Seminole Tribe was very guarded with their information, however I wanted to become familiar with the culture without crossing any boundaries. I decided to provide my experience with the Seminole Tribe to the family therapy field and illustrate what it has been like to work with the Seminole culture from an anthropologist approach. Since, there is not much research on the Seminole Tribe, I wanted to fill in the gaps for the family therapy field. My primary focus was to focus on the clients and how they respond to a new family therapist who is an outsider to the tribe.

Additionally, this study addresses how an anthropologist approach takes place with the Seminole clients to get a clear understanding on the culture and how clients open up and allow the family therapist to guide their lives in the right direction towards remaining abstinent from alcohol and mood altering substances. Taking an anthropological point of view is not just a good idea when working with the Seminole Tribe, but that it is also a good idea for anyone practicing

family systems therapy. Furthermore, the study will describe all the cultural events and ceremonies participated by me to demonstrate a form of connection with my Seminole clients. It is essential to acknowledge the need for professionals to be culturally sensitive and change from a professional role to a student role in order to join and engage with clients who are guarded and do not trust the outside world, in this case non-tribal members. Further, the need to understand culture and the role of a family therapist as an anthropologist demonstrates the importance of culture and the perspective of how we professionals view our clients. To that purpose, this study utilizes the qualitative research method guided by personal experiences at an addiction treatment setting with clients from the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

#### *Overview of the Chapters*

The second chapter provides a literature review to include the history of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The third chapter includes detailed description of the Ethnography method of qualitative research applied in this study and data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the findings and the fifth chapter discusses relevant research and implications of how a family therapist is welcomed in the world of the Seminole Tribe of Florida through an anthropologist stance.

## Chapter II

### *Review of Literature*

#### *Introduction*

Culture can be interpreted in many factors by individuals. Kluckhohn (as cited in Geertz, 1973), defined culture as follows:

1. "the total way of life of a people"
2. "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"
3. "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"
4. "an abstraction from behavior"
5. "a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave"
6. "a store house of pooled learning"
7. "a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems"
8. "learned behavior"
9. "a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior"
10. "a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men"
11. "a precipitate of history and turning perhaps in desperation, to smiles, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix" (pp. 4-5).

The first Native Americans who were later known as the Seminole Indians moved to Florida from Southern Alabama and Georgia by 1740 (Jumper & West, 2001). The Seminole Indians are the descendants of the Creek people (Alderson, 2013). The Seminole Tribal members spoke seven languages, Muscogee, Hitchiti, Koasati, Alabama, Natchez, Yuchi and Shawnee (SemTribe, 2014). However, today, Muscogee (Creek) and Miccosukee are two languages used



among the Seminoles (Jumper & West, 2001). The Seminole population was Muscogee-speaking Creeks, who came to Florida after defeating Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814 (Jumper & West, 2001). According to Covington (1993), "The first Seminoles were really Creeks who had migrated to Florida (p. 5). The first Seminole War took place in 1817 for one year due to a border conflict among the southern plantation owners and the Seminoles regarding the ownership of cattle and slaves (Jumper & West, 2001, p.1). In 1830, Andrew Jackson forced the Indian Removal Act, which was to move the Indians out of the Southeast and allow the land for white settlement. The Indian Removal act resulted the Second Seminole War (Alderson, 2013). According to Jumper and West (2001), "The Florida Seminoles were the only tribe to offer armed resistance, and the Second Seminole War lasted seven years 1835-42, (p. 2). The war stories illustrated tribal history and entertainment, which was passed down to generations enforcing distrust of whites (Jumper and West, 2001, p. 8). West (1998) stated, "the Seminoles emerged with extreme reticence towards outsiders and an overt wariness of being tricked and taken to Oklahoma, a fear that lasted far into the twentieth century (p. 60). Covington (1993) stated,

"A dilemma during all three Seminole wars (1817-18, 1835-42, and 1855-58) was caring for the Seminole children, who suffered greatly. Some parents killed their infants when it was feared that their crying could lead the soldiers to their hiding places; some parents dug holes in the ground and placed their infants in the holes, shielded from the sun by palmetto fronds" (p. 83).

The Third Seminole War in the 19th century was when the U.S. attempted to remove close to five thousand Seminoles from Florida, however the government was not successful (Jumper & West, 2001). The Third Seminole War was caused by a survey party that was

attacked while surveying which is today known as the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation. The Florida natives were divided into two camps, one group become known as the Miccosukee Tribe of Seminole Indians of Florida and the second group the unaffiliated Independent or Traditional Seminoles who took the offer of the reservation lands and began a new way to sustain the Seminole culture (Jumper & West, 2001). The Seminoles used the reservations as preservation areas to continue the customs, language and self-government of the Seminole Tribe (SemTribe, 2014).

#### *No Surrender!*

By May 10, 1842, President John Tyler ordered the end of military actions against the Seminoles, over twenty million dollars was spent, fifteen hundred American soldiers had died and no formal peace treaty was signed (SemTribe, 2014). At that time, it marked the most costly military campaign in the young country's history. And it wasn't over yet. Thirteen years later, a U.S. Army survey party, searching for Abiaka and other Seminole groups was attacked by Seminole warriors under the command of Billy Bowlegs (Alderson, 2013). Bowlegs was captured, which ended the aggressions between the Seminoles and the United States (Alderson, 2013). According to historians there may have been only a few hundred unconquered Seminole men, women and children alive who were all hiding in the swamps and Everglades of South Florida (McReynolds, 1957). Unlike the other Indian tribes, the U.S. government could not force a surrender from the Florida Seminoles, the U.S. declared the war ended and no peace treaty was ever signed (SemTribe).

#### *Indian Reorganization Act*

In 1934, Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act, recognizing the rights of American Indians to conduct popular vote elections and govern their own political affairs by constitution and bylaws (Mulroy, 2007). The Seminoles did not trust the government and did not

take advantage of the Indian Reorganization Act opportunity until twenty-three years later when the Seminole Tribe was faced with official termination by the U.S. Government (Mulroy, 2007). The Seminole Tribe did file a petition with the U.S. Indian Claims Commission in 1947 for a settlement to cover their lands lost to the U.S. government attackers (Mulroy, 2007).

### *Seminole Tribal Members Today*

The first smoke shop, tax free tobacco products was opened in 1977 giving the Seminoles a stable enterprise which continues, even today, bringing significant revenue into the Seminole Tribe (Pleasants & Kersey, 2010). Gaming, such as casinos and bingo halls are the number one economic enterprise for the Seminole Tribe (Pleasants & Kersey, 2010). Today, the Seminole Tribe spends over one million dollars each year on education for the Tribal college students (SemTribe, 2014). The Seminoles have three main reservations, Big Cypress, Hollywood, and Brighton (Jumper & West, 2001). Over three hundred Seminole Tribal members are employed by the Seminole Tribe, which is operated by Tribal members supported by both the Tribal Council and the Tribal Board (Jumper & West, 2001). The Tribal Council is the chief governing body, composed of a Chairman, a Vice-Chairman and Council Representatives from each reservation (Jumper & West, 2001). The Council administers the Seminole Police Department, the Human Resources programs, the Tribal gaming enterprises, citrus groves, the Billie Swamp Safari, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum and the majority of the Tribe's cigarette related enterprises (Alderson, 2013).

The government of the Seminole Tribe of Florida is exempt from all federal or state taxes, however, individual Tribal members are liable for the state and federal taxes as any citizen (SemTribe, 2014). The Tribe does not have a court system, legal and criminal matters that are not resolved on the community level are referred to state or federal authorities (SemTribe, 2014).

## *Seminole Culture*

### *Clans*

A Seminole born from a Seminole mother is a member of her Clan, which is a traditional extended family unit (Jumper & West, 2001). Within the Seminole Tribe there are eight clans, which are Panther, Bear, Deer, Wind, Bigtown, Bird, Snake, and Otter clan (Mulroy, 2007). When couples get married, husbands live in the wife's clan camp (Jumper & West, 2001). Individuals who are in the same clan are not allowed to get married together, however they can marry someone blood related as long as they are from a different clan (Mulroy, 2007). When the last female dies from a clan, the clan is extinct (West & Jumper, 2001). In the Seminole culture, women play a significant role, taking care of the children, cooking, cleaning. If a married couple separate, the wife gathers all the husband's belongings and takes it to his mother's camp (Jumper & West, 2001). Among the eight clans, the Panther clan is the largest clan in today's Seminole Tribe of Florida (West & Jumper, 2001). In order to be qualified as a tribal member, an individual must be quarter Seminole (Personal Communication, Andy Buster & Helene Buster, April 15, 2014).

### *Chickee*

Early housing for the Seminoles was made out of palmetto thatch over a cypress log frame, called a Chickee (MacCauley, 2000). According to Ernie Tiger,

“The chickee was constructed with cypress logs and palm thatch leaves woven together by vines or thin ropes. It had no walls only a thatched roof that covered the area around the upward standing cypress logs submerged shallowly into the earth” (SemTribe, 2014).

### *Green Corn Dance*

Green Corn Dance is a spiritual ceremony that takes place every spring for four days giving Seminoles the opportunity to participate in purification and manhood ceremonies (MacCauley, 2000). According to Alderson (2013),

“Participants in the annual Green Corn Ceremony often fasted for four or more days to purify mind, body, and spirit. Fasting served to starve the body and feed the soul, according to Muscogee and Seminole beliefs. And in this case, fasting was a means of gaining freedom. The Seminoles were also able to obtain certain herbs that aided in the purification process, and maybe some other things into play as well. Some say it was Seminole magic” (p. 87).

Also, during the ceremony tribal disputes take place (Jumper & West, 2001). Men and women are separated and placed into different camps based on their clans (Alderson, 2013). Stomp dancers chant and follow the leader, who is referred as the medicine man (Covington, 1993).

### *Medicine Men*

Within the Seminoles there is variety of medicine traditions in regards to death (Covington, 1993). When a death takes place, all the family members mourn for four days and on the fourth morning the family will use herbs provided by the medicine man (Personal Communication, Andy Buster & Helene Buster, April 15, 2014). Many Seminoles are Christians, however they do respect and seek help from the medicine man and other spiritual leaders (Covington, 1993). Medicine men and women play a significant role within the Seminole, however details in regards to the medicine culture is not disclosed outside of the tribe (Covington, 1993). The role of the medicine man is explained by an anthropologist interviewing Billie Motlow, who was the Chief Medicine Man of Mikasuki (as cited in Covington, 1993).

“A most common cause of disease is the loss of the ghost or soul. The Seminoles believe in existence of a double soul. One soul may leave the body in sleep and wander far afield while the other leaves the body only at death. The nightly adventures of the first soul are revealed in dreams. To discover the cause of sickness a medicine man must analyze dreams. His informant explained that sometimes the ghost enjoyed his nocturnal adventures so much that it did not come back at dawn. When this happened the person who had dreamed suddenly found that his body became sick. Hence a medicine man always asks his patients first about their dreams. Upon leaving from the dream how the soul has been detained the medicine man obtains the proper herbs, mixes them in a pot, and sings the proper chants beseeching the soul to return. It was important to blow his breath through the medicine pipe, “his ammunition,” as this power of breath is called. The medicine man believed that certain magical power comes from himself through the pipe and that this power is sufficient in most cases to retrieve the wondering soul” (Covington, 1993, p. 152).

Medicine men play a significant role within the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The Seminole traditional ways continue on with the Seminoles in the present era.

### *Seminole Ways*

Jumper and West (2001), shared beliefs that were passed down from the older days (p.54).

1. When you hear a red bird singing near you, it's a sign you're going to have a visitor from far away.
2. Never put a ring on your pointing finger or thumbs-they'll never bend again.
3. If a bear is killed to eat, when it is cooked never put salt on it, it is believed that if you do, when you go into the woods, it will kill you.

4. If you are out in the Everglades and hear a woman cry at a distance, don't answer or try to go out to see what the problem is, because the cry is a panther, trying to lure you out to kill you.
5. Don't ever wear feathers of birds around your head or carry them, because your neck will turn and you can't get it straight again, until the medicine man puts medicine on it,
6. Books belonged to white peoples-not Indians-and you never look at them.
7. Young people should never stare at older people or look at them or stand near them.

The Seminoles are guarded with their cultural values and traditions, however Jumper and West (2001) stated, "Younger women writers see the value of discussing their own generations' struggles with life on the reservations, substance abuse, abject poverty, government bureaucracy" (p. xiii). Within the Seminole Tribe, substance abuse has played a significant role by causing a high number of deaths among the tribal members (Jumper & West, 2001). Based on my curiosity with the Seminole Tribe, there is a lack of research not only about the Seminole Tribe, but regarding family therapist working with the tribal members who suffer from substance abuse. Therefore, having the opportunity to work with the Seminole Tribe has allowed me to add great value to the family therapy field regarding my interaction with the tribal members.

#### *Psychotherapy, Systemic Therapy, & Family Therapy*

Psychotherapy has been developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by Sigmund Freud, who is known to be the father of psychoanalysis and one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most influential thinkers (Nugent & Jones, 2009). Freud's psychoanalytic theory focused on the individual as he/she negotiated the stages of psychosexual development (Gagliardi, Guise, Lapidus, & Vickers, 2001, p. 4). Psychotherapy can be viewed as providing counseling to individuals, families, and couples. Hackney and Cormier (2005) define professional counseling

as: “the application of mental health, psychological, and human development principles through cognitive, affective, behavioral and systemic intervention strategies, that address wellness, personal growth, and career development, as well as pathology” (pp. 2-3). Hackney and Cormier (2005), write about the counselor’s characteristics that are considered important, such as self-awareness and understanding, good psychological health, sensitivity to and understanding of racial, ethical, and cultural factors in self and others, open-mindedness, objectivity, competence, trustworthiness, and interpersonal attractiveness (p. 13). The psychotherapy perspectives illustrate the importance of establishing rapport and relationship with clients, assessing the problem, setting goals, initiating interventions, planning termination, and follow up (Hackney & Cormier, 2005).

The Systemic therapy movement has been rooted in the 1950s by Gregory Bateson, who was studying relationships between schizophrenia and interpersonal functioning within the family (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). Stimulated by Bateson’s thinking, the next 20 years have molded the family therapy field (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). In the recent years, solution-focused and narrative therapy has emerged in the systemic therapy approach (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). Systemic thinking is studying matter and people in relationships. It is a pattern observed among people rather than individuals (Becvar & Becvar, 1999). Hackney and Cormier (2005) identified the following systemic intervention skills as goals for the counseling process: joining (establishing rapport with the family), generating and observing interactions, diagnosing the family structure, identifying and modifying interactions, and reconstructing boundaries (p. 273).

Family Therapy models emerged from the general system theory and cybernetics (Gagliardi, Guise, Lapidus, & Vickers, 2001). In 1940, biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy was



known as a father of general systems theory (Gagliardi, et al., 2001). Von Bertalanffy (as cited in Gagliardi, et al., 2001) defined organism as, “an open system engaged in continuous inflow and outflow of energy or information with its environment (p. 19). Cybernetics has emerged from mathematics, anthropology, and medicine in 1940 (Gagliardi, et al., 2001). Nichols and Schwartz (1998) discuss the influence of cybernetics to the postmodern approach in the family therapy field as: “Cybernetics had encouraged us to view a family system as a flawed machine...and fail to notice the relationship between social context and family dysfunction” (p. 326). Gregory Bateson is known as a father of cybernetics, who was an anthropologist interested in self-correcting systems (Gagliardi, et al., 2001). Bateson viewed communication as the foundation of maintaining systems through positive and negative feedback loops, along with focusing on the paradoxical communication styles with animals and human beings (Gagliardi, et al., 2001).

Before 1980, the family therapy field considered the “...truth of all things, could be uncovered through objective scientific observation and measurement” (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p. 317). The 1990’s transformed the field with the introduction of a postmodern approach. Gagliardi, et al., (2001) stated, “postmodern therapists do attend the social context, and they are interested in the ways that individuals and families construct their views of reality” (p. 16). According to Freedman & Combs (1996) postmodernists, “Focus on how the language that we use constitutes our world and beliefs” (p. 28). In other words, it is in language, which is constructed by societies that develops a vision reality (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 28). Postmodernism consists of viewing situations from a “not knowing” stance (Freedman and Combs, 1996). Freedman and Combs (1996) state, “Adopting a postmodern, narrative, social constructionist worldview offers useful ideas about how power, knowledge, and “truth” are negotiated in families and larger cultural aggregations (p. 22). The Postmodern philosophers

disagree with the modern perspective and prefer that reality is a mental construction, “there are no universal truths, only points of view” (Gagliardi, et al., 2001, p. 15). Gagliardi, et al., (2001) define postmodernism as: “A philosophic view held by an eclectic group of family therapy models in which the practitioners consider reality to be subjective, and attend to social and political norms within the client’s culture” (p. 491). Goldenberg and Goldenberg (as cited Gagliardi, et al., 2001) discuss the role of a postmodern therapist,

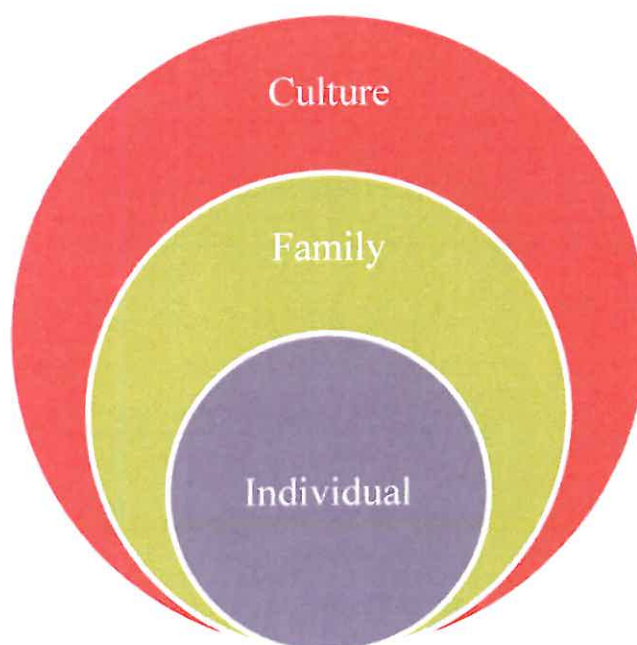
“Practitioners no longer assume the role of an expert who remains outside the system, but instead are *part* of the therapy process. The therapist neither establishes goals nor determines the direction for the client families’ lives. Rather, he/she asks questions as a method of learning and reinterpreting experiences” (p. 16).

Family therapists work collaboratively with families to find a new meaning or a way of knowing “epistemology” through language (Gagliardi, et al., 2001). The idea of “epistemology,” is both how you know, and how you think you know things. Based on life interactions epistemology is a significant concept that lives in relations with the mind (Bateson, 1972). Therefore knowledge is connected with the mind, in which the mind is joined to its’ surroundings with interactions (Bateson, 1972). The role of a family therapist identifies with the idea of diversity by providing services to clients with an open-minded perspective. It is essential a family therapist reach out to clients from a non-expert stance and develop a trusting therapeutic relationship. The process of therapy involves meaning and understanding which is constructed socially in the therapeutic system process, which is known as a linguistic system (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 372). Human systems are linguistic systems by the domain of making meaning (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 377). According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988),

“It is in language that we are able to maintain meaningful human contact with each other and through which we share a reality” (p. 377).

What is required of a family therapist working with the Seminole Tribe is to take a non-expert stance, and to emotionally connect with the clients in order to form a trusting relationship that will lead to understanding culture first before conducting any therapy.

Figure 1 below, illustrates the individual in context.



(Figure 1) (Hackney & Cormier, 2005)

### *Qualitative Research*

It is important to understand the concept of qualitative research. Creswell (2013) provides a definition for qualitative research,

“Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problem addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of

data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change” (p. 44).

A unique quality of qualitative research is that it can take place in a natural setting, having the researcher collect data in the field where the participants are experiencing the problems (Creswell, 2013). Working with the Seminoles in a substance abuse treatment setting at John’s Place, I am able to gather information by talking directly to my clients and observing them behave within the context of tribal life (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) defines characteristics of qualitative research as follows:

1. The researcher conducts the study in the field in a natural setting
2. The researcher does not use someone else’s instrument but gathers data on his or her own instrument.
3. The researcher collects multiple types of data.
4. The researcher uses both inductive and deductive reasoning in making sense of the data.
5. The researcher reports the perspectives of the participants and their multiple meanings.
6. The researcher reports the setting or context in which the problem is being studied.
7. The researcher allows the design or procedures of the study to emerge.
8. The researcher discusses his or her background and how it shapes the interpretation of the findings.

9. The researcher reports a complex picture of the phenomenon being studied (p. 67).

### *Anthropology*

I want to view the Seminole culture from an anthropological point of view before I play the family therapist role with my clients. My personal focus is to study the Seminole culture and understand their world in order for me to have the opportunity to become their family therapist in a substance abuse treatment setting. According to Chang (2008), “anthropologists who locate culture “in the private sphere of the self” value individual interpretations of culture without abandoning the very basic notion of group orientation of culture shared by group members” (p. 44). Being an anthropologist means that I will seek to learn about the Seminole culture and not impose my own culture onto my clients. According to Sprenkle and Moon (1996), “A researcher learns about a culture through observation, participation, and talking to its members in the interview process” (p. 34). The Seminole Tribe is a different world in the United States. The culture is very guarded and in order for me to have the opportunity to engage with my Seminole clients, I need to learn about the culture first before I can provide any form of effective therapy. In order for me to join with my clients, it is significant for me to be open-minded and understand that the tribal members are sensitive about their history. Therefore, I will not force my clients to share their history, but invite myself through a gentle conversation by providing active listening and taking advantage of the conversations that will flow between my clients and me. Having a conversation with a tribal member is significant because ordinarily they do not speak with non-tribal members about such intimate matters. My experience as a family therapist in a substance abuse treatment center has been rewarding because I have been able to engage with my clients by attending Seminole ceremonies and events. By attending events with my clients, I have been receiving culture history and information on the tribe without forcing my clients to answer

questions that I desire to be answered. Bernard (2006) discusses the importance of hanging out and gaining rapport,

“Hanging out builds trust, or rapport, and trust results in ordinary conversations and ordinary behaviors in your presence. Once you know, from hanging out, exactly what you want to know more about, and once people trust you not to betray their confidence, you’ll be surprised at the direct questions you can ask” (pp. 368-69).

I have taken an anthropological approach with the members of the tribe to in order to be an effective family therapist. Bernard (2006) stated, “Participant observation fieldwork is the foundation of cultural anthropology. It involves getting close to people and making them feel comfortable enough with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives” (p.342).

#### *Participant Observation*

Participant observation is experiencing the lives of the Seminole Tribe and studying the culture as much as I can (Bernard, 2006). Bernard (2006) describes participant observation,

“Participant observation involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from the immersion so you can intellectualize what you’ve seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly. When it’s done right, participant observation turns fieldworkers into instruments of data collection and data analysis” (p. 344).

Creswell (2013) explains the meaning of field work, “Gather information in the context or setting where the group works or lives. This is called fieldwork.” Fieldwork entails going to the research site, respecting the daily lives of individuals at the site, and collecting a wide variety of materials (Creswell, 2013). Bernard (2006) describes the three fieldwork roles.

1. Complete participant- becoming a member of a group without letting on that you're there to do research.
2. Participant observer-insiders who observe and record some aspects of life around them (observing participants) or they can be outsiders who participate in some aspects of life around them and record what they can (they're participating observers).
3. Complete observer- involves following people around and recording their behavior with little or any interaction- direct observation (p. 347).

As the participant observer my role is learned in the field with the Seminole Tribe by becoming the instrument for data collection and analysis through my own experience (Bernard, 2006). As a participant observer, my skills involve building explicit awareness, building my memory in order to remember things I see and hear, and maintaining novice status in order to genuinely illustrate my desire to learn about the Seminole Tribe (Bernard, 2006). Is important knowing the difference when not to be naïve and immersing with the Seminole culture (Bernard, 2006). According to Sprenkle and Moon (1996), "Ethnographers learn about the culture of a people through the actions of the individual members of the culture and through discussion with them. The ethnographer learns by actively participating and observing (p. 35).

#### *Ethnographic Research Method in Family Therapy*

Geertz (1973) describes ethnographic research as, "a personal experience; trying to formulate the basis on which one imagines, always excessively, one has found them is what anthropological writing consists of as a scientific endeavor" (p. 13). As a Family therapist working with the Seminole Tribe, I enter the culture with a therapeutic end by connecting emotionally with the clients. Connecting emotionally and becoming genuinely curious with the Seminole clients can be effective by overcoming external barriers to conduct psychotherapy. It is



significant for the clients to feel respected. What the researcher has done with the Seminole culture is allowed the clients to teach her about their culture. As a family therapist, it is my experience to discuss how I understand the Seminole culture, however I do not know if it is true because it is my experience. According to Sprenkle and Moon (1996), “Humans reflect on the meaning of events and even create meaning from them. The science of family therapy must be able to measure and apply scientific method but also ought to examine the possibilities that a humanities dimension can add to our research and clinical work (p. 25).

Ethnographic research is a qualitative methodology, which focuses on studying a culture (Creswell, 2013). According to Sprenkle and Moon (1996), the word ethnography comes from the Greek, referring it to race, tribe, or people (p. 26). Harris (as cited in Creswell, 2013) described ethnography as a qualitative design where the researcher interprets the learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture (p. 90). Creswell (2013) defines the process of ethnography, which is “extended observations of the group, most often through *participant observation* in which the researcher is *immersed* in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants (p. 90). As an ethnographer, this researcher seeks to study the meaning of behaviors, language, and interaction among the Seminole clients (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) stated, “Ethnography had its beginning in comparative cultural anthropology conducted by early 20<sup>th</sup>-century anthropologists, such as Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Mead” (p. 91). Spradley (1980) stated, “Ethnographic fieldwork is the hallmark of cultural anthropology” (p. 3). Ethnography describes a culture, allowing the researcher to understand the culture from a native perspective (Spradley, 1980). Ethnography is viewed as learning from people, by the researcher becoming a student (Spradley, 1980). Geertz (1973), defines three characteristics of ethnographic description, which are, “it is



interpretative, what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the “said” of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms” (p. 20). The focus in ethnography is setting individuals’ stories within the context of their culture and culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013, p. 102). According to Malinowski (as cited in Sprenkle & Moon, 1996), “the ethnographer’s goal is to grasp the native’s point of view, his relationship to life, to realize his vision of his world” (p. 26).

A family therapists writing about the Seminole culture from the client’s point of view is unique. This research seeks to describe the steps the researcher took with the tribe to understand all the perspectives of the clients (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). “Little has been written about family therapy from a patient/client perspective. Most accounts of therapy are written by or based on the perceptions/accounts of clinicians, theoreticians, and researchers (Kruger, 1986; Fessler, 1983 as cited in Sprenkle & Moon, 1996, p. 27).

As illustrated in Figure 1, ethnography follows a cyclical pattern (Spradley, 1980). Spradley (1980) explained the ethnographic research cycle by first defining a research problem, formulating a hypotheses, making operational definitions, designing a research instrument, gathering data, analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and reporting the results (Spradley, 1980).



(Figure 2) (Spradley, 1980, p 29)

Figure 2, demonstrates the formation of ethnography branching from qualitative research and anthropology.

According to Sprenkle and Moon (1996), “The goal of family therapy ethnographers have usually been to achieve a better understanding of the therapeutic process from the insider’s perspective and to improve appropriateness of professional practice” (p. 46).

Sprenkle and Moon (1996) wrote further:

“The purpose of family therapy ethnographies is to describe how culture affects change processes. This focus, which is much narrower than that of traditional ethnographies, has implication for how and when family therapy ethnographies will be conducted. Whether pitched as process research or as an effort to describe cultural influences on change process, the family therapy ethnography offers an essential tool for interpreting the massive amounts of narrative and other forms of data that family therapists collect.

Traditional ethnographies' level of abstraction may provide too many details and too few organizing principles to help us understand how those details fit together" (p. 56).

### *Fieldwork Experience*

In the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity of being the family therapist to the Seminole Tribe of Florida clients at a substance abuse treatment center. My first interaction with the Seminole Tribe was interesting because the clients were very guarded and expressed their trust issues with non-tribal members out loud and clear. In some aspect, I related to the clients because it took me back to 1994, when I first moved to the United States from Armenia. I was scared and guarded with the Americans. I was taught not to share any information about myself to anyone besides my family. However, even though I experienced interacting with "outsiders" who were not Armenians as an uncomfortable feeling, my experience did not make a difference with the tribal members on their perspective about me. I understood that my experience is different from their experience. We are all unique and even though it may be a similar situation, we all do not have to relate to one another based on the situation of interacting with an "outsider." I assumed they were scared of me and did not trust me, however, I came to find out that they were not scared of me, they just did not trust me yet because I was not a tribal member.

I took my time to bond with each client at a slow pace in order for them to get to know me and study me as I planned on doing the same thing. Every chance I received, I attended activities with my clients in order to break the uncomfortable tension between us, whether it was going to bowling or going out to eat together. Fortunately, it did not take me long to allow the clients to become comfortable with me by engaging with me, however this did not mean that they trusted me. I recognized that the clients' families were much guarded and extremely distant when they came for family sessions. I needed to work on my relationships with the families in

order to feel welcomed by the tribal members. The more I made myself available outside of my office, the more I noticed the families and the clients approaching me and interacting with me. Even though, I may not have blonde hair and blue eyes, I was still considered an outsider. It can become challenging when working with the Seminole Tribe because if one tribal member does not accept you, he or she can have all the tribal members go against you. Based on my experience working with the Seminole Tribe, I believe it is has been extremely helpful inviting my clients to explore pieces of my world as they slowly open their doors for me to explore in their worlds through the colorful stories they share with me. Therefore, as a family therapist taking an anthropologist approach and writing my study through my personal reflections, allows my audience to learn about the Seminole Tribe of Florida from up close and personal.

Sprenkle and Moon (1996) explain:

“The key to a successful scholar-practitioner relationship lies in applying a systemic methodology to clinical activities within a field setting. Our clinical activities helped us to develop impressions, hunches, and questions; our clinical activities helped us to systematically collect and analyze the field data contained in memos, individual interviews, group interviews, and personal commentaries. Our clinical activities gave us a reason to conduct research; our research helped us to refine our clinical thinking and expertise. We believe that ethnography’s unique contribution to family therapy will be as a clinical science of the humanities. Within ethnographies, the arts and the sciences are joined toward a better understating of the human condition” (p. 57).

## CHAPTER III

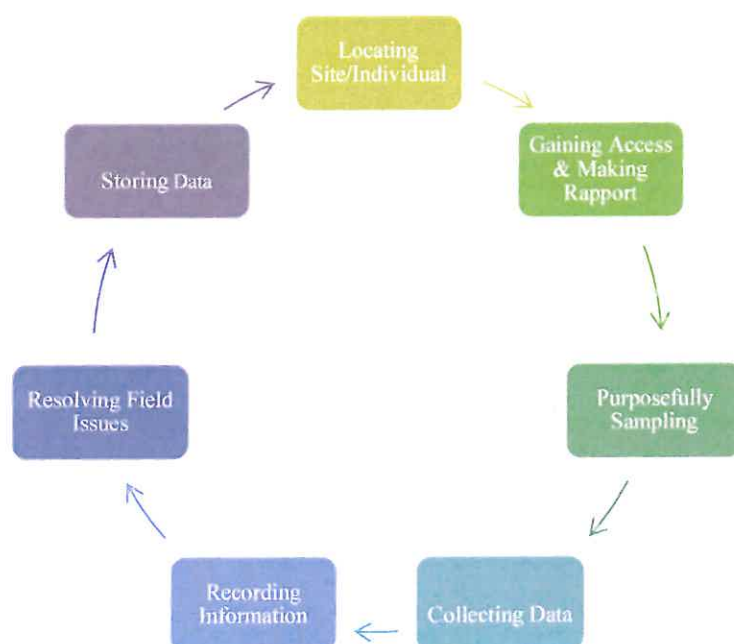
### Methodology: Family Therapist's Reflections

#### *Introduction*

This dissertation is a qualitative inquiry describing how the researcher grew through the process of understanding members of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The nature of this research is describing my personal experience with the Seminole Tribe. I have the opportunity to explore my role as an anthropologist with the Seminole Tribe of Florida through illustrations of building trusting relationships with my clients before conducting any form of effective therapy.

#### Data Collection

Creswell (2013) illustrated the procedure of data collection, "It means gaining permissions, conducting a good qualitative sampling strategy, developing means for recording information both digitally and on paper, storing data, and anticipating ethical issues that may arise" (p. 145). Creswell (2013) defines the data collection circle that consists of a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering valuable information to answer emerging research questions (p. 146). In Figure 3, a qualitative researcher participates in the process of collecting data.



(Figure 3) (Creswell, 2013, p. 146)

Working with the Seminole Tribe at John's Place gives the researcher the opportunity to build a rapport with the clients, which provides the researcher a good data from the Seminole Tribal members (Creswell, 2013). The researcher will use purposeful sampling process in this qualitative research. Purposeful sample is having access to in-depth information that will provide good insight to a specific phenomenon that the researcher will explore with the Seminole Tribe (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling means, "that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 256). The researcher will spend time looking and studying the Seminole Tribe to explore in depth, therefore, purposeful sampling is appropriate. The researcher will work with tribal members at a partial hospitalization treatment center at least five days out of the week in order to build relationships with the tribal members and receive knowledge from the clients about the Seminole Tribe. The researcher will meet with Seminole Family Services administrative team, which is the primary referral source to John's

Place every Friday to staff cases and receive updates and information on tribal members who are clients at the substance abuse treatment center. The director of Family Services is a tribal member, who is a very powerful woman and she has great amount of knowledge regarding her Seminole culture in which she will provide rich information regarding her tribe. Having access to the director of the Seminole Tribe allows the researcher to learn and study the culture up close and personal. The received information regarding the Seminole Tribe will be through observations, interviews, and note taking (Creswell, 2013). Through observation, the researcher is participating and observing in order to gain insider views and fully engage with the Seminole Tribe (Creswell, 2013). The researcher did not only serve as a recorder of the events that transpired within the treatment center within the tribe, but she was a participant observer/researcher of what transpired during her experience at agency.

Creswell defined four types of participating and observing as follows:

1. Complete participant: The researcher is fully engaged with the people he or she is observing. This may help him or her establish greater rapport with the people being observed.
2. Participant as observer: The researcher is participating in the activity at the site. The participant role is more salient than the researcher role. This may help the researcher gain insider views and subjective data. However, it may be distracting for the researcher to record data when he or she is integrated into the activity.
3. Nonparticipant/observer as participant: The researcher is an outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance. He or she can record data without direct involvement with activity or people.



4. Complete observer: The researcher is neither seen nor noticed by the people under study (p. 166-67).

It is significant to design an observational protocol as a technique in order to record notes in the field, such as notes about my experience (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) stated, "Prepare your full notes immediately after observation. Give thick and rich narrative description of the people and events under observation" (p. 168). According to Jorgensen (as cited in Creswell, 2013), "The approach of changing one's role from that of an outsider to that of an insider through the course of the ethnographic study is well documented in the field research" (p. 162).

### *Field Issues*

An issue to be considered is the information about the tribe being shared with non-tribal members, since the culture is so guarded. Some field issues will be addressed during the role of the researcher. Creswell (2013) discussed the field issues in the process of the observations,

"There are challenges as well with the mechanics of observing, such as remembering to take field notes, recording quotes accurately for inclusion in field notes, determining the best timing for moving from nonparticipant to a participant (if the role change is desired), keeping from being overwhelmed at the site with information, and learning how to funnel the observation from the broad pictures to a narrower one in time" (p. 172).

The interview process is an unequal dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee, allowing the interviewer to take control and guide the interview process based on a specific agenda that leads the researcher's interpretation and forcing the interviewee to withhold information that can be valuable (Creswell, 2013). Another significant field issue is ethical issues, such as revealing tribal information that is not generally shared with people outside of the



tribe (Creswell, 2013). It is significant to be mindful when conducting data collection to consider issues that can create conflict with the research.

### *Storing Data*

The received information from the Seminole Tribe will be stored in computer files that are passcode protected and only accessible to the researcher (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell listed principles about data storage:

1. Always develop backup copies of computer files.
2. Use high-quality tapes for audio-recording information during interviews.
3. Develop a master list of types of information gathered.
4. Protect the anonymity of participants by masking their names in the data.
5. Develop a data collection matrix as a visual means of locating and identifying information for a study (p. 175).

### *Personal Reflections*

The researcher's personal reflections allow her to become involved with the Seminole culture, by explore her stance by filling comfortable with the tribal members by illustrating her dissertation. The researcher's goal is to illustrate a story about the Seminole Tribe as an anthropological point of view based on lived experiences with the tribal members. Personal reflections provide the audience different perspectives peeking into the world of the Seminole Tribe from a family therapist that has placed her therapist hat aside and put on her student hat on by receiving knowledge from a unique culture known as the Seminoles. The researcher's reflections will demonstrate the memories developed with the tribal members to introduce knowledge about the culture far passed the small history that we have access from the history books on the library book shelves. Stories discussed by the clients, tribal members, and

coworkers will be shared by the researcher. The researcher will analyze information from notes and discussions with the tribal members at the treatment center, along with attending events with the tribe.

### Sympathy, Empathy, and Compassion

Working with Tribal members, I got in touch with myself by utilizing sympathy, empathy, and compassion based on specific situations with my clients. I was able to navigate the three concepts in variety of events. As I attended funerals, I utilized sympathy with my clients. Sympathy demonstrates the process of feeling pity for someone. According to Flemons (2002), "Pity, is a toe-dipping enterprise. We feel for our clients, while we stay safe and distant, "professionally" removed" (p. 47). During therapeutic sessions, I provided empathy to my clients based on the painful and hurtful stories they shared with me. Empathy is experienced by the therapist and communicated to the client (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). The process of empathy allows the therapist to experience the client's world and conditions that allow the client to understand that his or her world has been experienced by another person (Hackney & Cormier, 2005). Carl Rogers discussed accurately experienced empathy:

Means that the therapist senses accurately the feelings and personal meanings that the client is experiencing and communicates this acceptant understanding to the client. When functioning best, the therapist is so much inside the private world of the other that he or she can clarify not only the meanings of which the client is aware but even those just below the level of awareness. Listening, of this very special active kind, is one of the most potent forces of change that I know (p. 136).

My compassion was always present with me as I navigated the foreign culture called “The Seminole Tribe of Florida. Compassion allowed me to be present and curious about my clients. Compassion assisted me with working with my tribal clients to create change (Flemons, 2002).

*I am Me*

This dissertation gives the researcher the opportunity to be challenged by her own values and perspectives about a culture outside of her own. As long as I continue to connect with my clients, I will have the opportunity to learn about the Seminole culture. I am willing to disclose my personal battles with my Seminole clients and along with fond memories created among myself and the tribal members. From tribal ceremonies to rituals I will be participating to get as close as I can with the Seminole Tribe as long as they permit me to do so. I am grateful to have the opportunity to work with such a unique culture and to have the opportunity to share my life journey with the Seminole Tribe with my fellow family therapists. I have some fears that I will work through and not fight against in this process of learning about the Seminole Tribe as an anthropologist. My fears follow me by allowing me to question myself, such as am I a confident therapist? Will the clients take me seriously because I am not in recovery? Will I receive any respect from the tribal members based on my age? I no longer can battle with my fears on how I view myself as a young Armenian family therapist, I am going forward with my fears and taking a big chance to challenge myself that I am a confident family therapist that will learn about the Seminole Culture and give back to the family therapy field based on true lived experiences with clients from the Seminole Tribe.

## CHAPTER IV

### Analysis and Interpretations

This qualitative study is composed of two parts. The first contains specifics of how the researcher worked with a substance abuse center within the Seminole tribe, and some of the very unique aspects of her doing so by utilizing specific entries from her personal journal. The second part describes what she did once inside of this unique cultural setting that allowed her to have an ongoing human relationship with a group people who do not share a culture common to her.

The researcher also interviewed two tribal members who were associates of hers. The participants were one female and one male. The female was from the Brighton Reservation, and the male participant was from the Hollywood Reservation. The interview questions focused on the therapist's experiences working with tribal members, and what allowed her to join and navigate the Seminole system. The questions also explored the interviewees' perceptions about how tribal members think about therapy. To ensure anonymity, the participants' names and other identifying information have been changed. It was a privilege to listen to and share these participants' perceptions. I am grateful for their knowledge about the Seminole Tribe.

Appreciating the way clients and therapists join in this context requires a good deal more sensitivity and nuance than in many mainstream family therapy settings. The Seminole Tribe is an immediate neighbor to mainstream South Florida/American culture, yet it also has its own tribal identity that runs deeply through tribal lives. Therefore, it is necessary for family therapists working with tribal members, within the tribe's borders, to join not only with the individual client, but also with the larger Seminole cultural context to better serve the needs of

these individuals. Connecting and building relationship with clients develops an opportunity to join together (Flemons, 2002)

### *Navigating a Self-contained Tribal Culture*

Qualitative research helps us understand the significance that individuals give to a “social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants” (Creswell, 1994, p. 1). The researcher accomplished this goal by gathering information from the journals she kept about her experiences working with tribal clients in the substance abuse setting, and also from some selected interviews.

### *My Experience with Tribal Clients*

As one who assimilated into American culture after emigrating from Armenia at eight years old, I too am attentive to the demands and opportunities that crossing into another culture affords. Therefore, I also contribute to the data as a reporter on my own experiences of gaining integration with tribal members within the tribal context.

Working with the Seminole Tribe has been an enlightening journey for me, and one that now allows me to share my experiences with the family therapy field. Being invited by tribal members to work within their native system was not an easy task. When I first began to work with tribal clients, it was difficult; I was tested in many ways. Tribal clients challenged me on a daily basis by expressing that I was not qualified to work with substance abusing tribal clients because I was not an addict. It took some months for the tribal clients to open up to due to the fact that I was not an addict. They gave me a chance by getting to know me and asking me questions about myself as they watched how I responded. I had different experiences working with female tribal clients and male tribal clients. The male tribal clients invited me to work with them quicker than the female clients. The male clients were more expressive with me and

curious about my life. The male clients asked several questions about my culture and why I wanted to work with tribal members. However, I found it more difficult to work with female tribal clients. For example, I had a female client who was not a big fan of mine and she expressed to me that I was too young to be a therapist. She was guarded with me and disqualified me as her therapist since we were close in age.

*Journal Entry-June 20, 2013:*

*Today has been a difficult day for me at work. It seems like not being in recovery continues to create disconnect with me and my clients, especially the female clients. I need to find a way to connect more with the female clients because the tension and the obvious competition among my female clients towards me has been overwhelming for me. I hope this process of joining with my clients becomes stronger because it has been difficult for me to accept.*

*As some months went by, she slowly started to engage with me. We attended a 5K walk event together conducted by Seminoles in Recovery. I decided to walk with her at the event as partners. The walk allowed us to join together and we encourage each other to complete the walk. After the event she was able to speak to me more frequently. She informed me that she was able to see me outside of myself, meaning I was out of the box and a normal person instead of this "perfect therapist" that she labeled me as.*

*Journal Entry-September 2014*

*Today was not a bad day; it actually allowed me to join with my client at the event. I must say the 5K was a great opportunity for me to connect with my female client who has been challenging me as her therapist. During our walk I noticed that she felt much comfortable with me outdoors versus indoors (therapist's office). I think I am going to get more involved with the outdoor activities, the event helped reduce the tension between me and my client.*

I decided to take a chance and do something different with my clients outside of my training as a "Western" family therapist by breaking the set of boundaries I was taught to follow. I was trained to not attend events with clients; however I recognized that participating in events with my tribal clients allowed me to be able to more successfully connect with the clients of the Seminole tribe. Based on my "Western training regarding ethical boundaries, having multiple or dual relationships with clients is not appropriate (Wilcoxon, Remley, & Gladding, 2012). According to Herlihy and Corey (1992), "Multiple or dual relationships are those in which marriage and family therapists assume two roles simultaneously with a person or persons engaging their professional assistance." I am aware that dual relationships can be problematic because they are pervasive, difficult to recognize, unavoidable, sometimes harmful but may also be beneficial, and subject of conflicting advice (Pearson & Piazza, 1997). I came to realize that staying in such a conventional mindset would not be beneficial to me or my clients in this particular setting because the tribal clients viewed the "outsiders" as working towards getting information from the tribe and using it against them. I realized that by attending events with the tribal clients it allowed for my clients to see me outside of the office and get to know me at a less intense setting. The events provided an opportunity for me and my clients to get to know each other in a less aggressive manner. It presented many opportunities for my tribal clients to observe

my intentions with providing therapeutic services with them, such as applying my compassion with the desire to help them guide their lives in the right direction. My clients appeared to be relaxed and less guarded once they saw me outside of business hours.

*Journal Entry-July 2015*

*Wow, what a difference from 2013 up to date. If I did not attend events with my clients, I would not get to know them through their cultural ways. The events have opened up many door ways for me and my clients to walk through and get to know each other. I noticed how important it is for my clients to see me at events. Before an event takes place, they always ask me if I am going to attend. I have been open to the idea of getting to know the Seminole culture based on my clients' invitations to the events. It has been nice to hear how my clients mention to me that I am not just coming to work as a job, but I love what I do.*

I dealt with resistance with tribal clients; however it did not stop me from continuing to do my best to connect with them. There were times where I felt discouraged and insecure about things because I felt as if I was not able to connect. I expressed these frustrations with Dr. Burnett, who was my internship supervisor at the time. He told me to continue to get to know the culture, and allow them to guide me through their culture and not rush the process of expecting them to accept me right away.

Cowan and Presbury (2000) discussed that resistance expresses the protective wisdom that may never be fully verbalized by clients. Therapist utilizing gentle approach such as empathy can help clients break through the resistance (Cowan & Presbury, 2000).

Working through "resistance" with my tribal clients allowed me to get to know them and understand the dance between us. They were testing me and wanted to see if I was able to hang around and not quit. Getting challenged by my clients was teaching me to remain open minded



and not take things too personally. Of course, some days I took things personally. However, the more I engaged with my clients by having casual conversations the more I realized that I needed to get accepted and invited when my clients were ready to receive therapy.

My transformation process from being the “outside therapist” Sunny to “genuine, human” Sunny consisted of about six months of engaging with my clients, carefully listening to them, and asking questions when appropriate to create an environment of flow in conversations. It was important for me to remain genuine by having conversations about food, shopping, sports, etc., and giving my clients an opportunity to share about their interests. Exploring the casual interests of my clients developed openings for my clients and me to engage. I gradually realized the key was not to force therapy on my clients, but rather to have conversations. Once conversations came easily between my clients and me, therapeutic conversations became much more comfortable for my clients to be part of. It was important for my clients to feel comfortable with me first, before they allowed the process of therapy to take place. However, presenting myself as an open and curious therapist allowed me to connect with tribal members through the simple act of human compassion.

What do I mean, “as open as I can be?” By being myself, not pretending or acting as if I am someone else, my clients were able to see through me and call me out by shouting that I needed to be Sunny and no one else. Hearing my clients give me advice and accepting me for who I am allowed my relationship with tribal member clients to blossom. I had a male client who suggested I be gentle and not assertive when I approached him about life issues. He informed me that tribal members are “hypersensitive” and being assertive creates anxiety for them. My tribal client told me that I needed to have gentle conversations with tribal members

rather than confrontational conversations. He was right. As I took his advice and approached him in a gentle manner, he was able to let his guard down and become vulnerable with me.

More advice that helped me connect and join with my tribal clients was attending tribal events with them. I noticed that when I attended the Rez Rally, which is an event that has all the tribal reservations gathered together to participated in a 5K walk/run, I was able to feel comfortable with my clients. During the Rez Rally, my clients and I walked together and spoke about life issues. Engaging outside of the office, I noticed that my clients were able to let their guard down and share more. Attending events with my clients allowed me to become closer to my clients. Sharing my skills and experiences with the family therapy field through this research project, I hope to provide a map for other clinicians working within cultural systems that are dissimilar from their own. Working with the Seminole tribal members for two years, I have been able to build therapeutic relationships with clients who are from a wholly foreign cultural system. Through my experience with the tribal members, I learned that in order for my clients to invite me into their world, I needed to invite them into my world first.

### *Emotional Authenticity*

A client of mine informed me that in order for him to share anything with me, I needed to give a piece of myself to him. At first I was not too comfortable with disclosing some things about myself because I was trained that self-disclosure should be kept at a minimum. However, in this situation, where I was clearly being identified as the “foreigner,” if I wanted to continue in this system, I had to place my familiar tools aside. If I was going to have a therapeutic relationship with this person, I had to recognize the tools I had to use, which were being offered to me by the tribal member clients. I told my client about my struggles adjusting to the American culture coming from Armenia. I shared about getting picked on and bullied when I was growing

up because I looked different and did not speak English. I decided to share about myself in order for my client to be able to share about where he came from and his struggles. He shared with me how he was picked on because he was Indian. He talked about not being able to fit in with the rest of the kids because he looked different. We were able to connect and join by disclosing about our struggles in life. Making myself comfortable physically and psychologically with my clients presented joining opportunities for me with my tribal clients (Flemons, 2002). It is useful to become comfortable within myself and allow myself to feel what I feel in order to be able to become helpful to my clients. If I attempt to stop myself from feeling a certain way I no longer become curious about my clients and their family and friends. If I become curious about my own feelings, I will allow myself to become curious about my clients and their world. Flemons (2002) stated,

“,,your eyes will never sparkle as long as you’re trying to pawn off the responsibility for your comfort onto your clients. You’ve got to find a way, in the midst of the chaos and drama in the therapy room, to make yourself comfortable” (p. 55).

The “larger cultural context” in navigating the Seminole cultural system was difficult at first because I did not know what to expect. Starting off, I was told that this was a group of individuals who trusted no one but members of their own tribe. What I did was take small steps with tribal clients, by not approaching them and asking questions, but rather having them become curious about me. This was different for me because I was used to becoming curious about clients. I learned however that with tribal clients becoming curious at the beginning of a therapeutic relationship can be viewed as too pushy. I noticed that my clients were not so quick to trust non- tribal members; therefore, I gave my clients their space.

Speaking to my supervisor at work and the CEO of my facility helped me remain patient. I was informed that it takes about six months for tribal clients to open up and start trusting therapists. Some may never trust a therapist because of the non-tribal factor. I understood that I needed to remain open minded and open to remaining a student first before taking the therapist role. I was able to join with tribal clients in a substance abuse setting by remaining patient and becoming open to learning about the Seminole culture and not assuming things. I had to let go of the idea that I had coming in that a highly structured 12 week substance abuse program would lead my clients to discover solutions.

It was significant for me to realize that my clients were going to teach me about their culture once they trusted my motives. They informed me that I needed to be myself first before I acted as an expert. Tribal clients are all about relationships. If they feel comfortable with you therapy can take place; however if they do not connect and become curious with you, it is going to be a challenging therapeutic relationship. According to Flemons (2002) it is significant to become curious and the process of change to take place with clients by taking the opportunity to become one with clients.

The challenge is to be able to look for and find your clients' humanity while they are still strangers, before they do you the favor of making choices or taking action you consider acceptable. If, looking at a client, you see only hopeless other, therapy is out of the question. Before you can hope to be helpful, you need to be able to acknowledge (to yourself) you disgust, outrage, fear (or whatever) and, practicing double vision, become curious about the possibilities for change. You can't manage such a balance if you are achieving psychological (or, indeed, physical) safety by staying an outsider (p. 52).

I listened to my supervisor about not forcing the clients to open up to me. I was instructed to attend all the events that the clients attended in order to allow them see me outside of office hours. The events gave me an opportunity to join by having the clients educate me about their culture and slowly opening up to me. The tribal fair was a fun event to be part of because clients were sharing about their cultural values, about the Pow Wow (spiritual and cultural dances) that took place at the event, and also educating me on their food. I had the opportunity to sit down and eat with my clients, which gave them an opening to describe their cultural dishes. My clients informed me that any time a tribal member offers food, I need to accept it out of respect for the individual. I navigated through the process of attending the tribal fair by following the lead of my clients and taking the event as a learning opportunity. I informed my clients that I never attended a tribal fair before, which gave them a chance to educate me about the tribal fair. It was helpful for me to remain curious about the fair, but not so aggressive about asking questions about everything in the fair. I was able to hang out with my clients and their families for several hours. My clients informed me that when they see me at events, they know that this is just not a job for me. They expressed that therapists who attend events outside of business hours care about the tribal clients by showing up to events and hanging out with them. Tribal clients want confirmation that the therapist is committed to them and that they are not just at work for the paycheck.

*Journal Entry-August 2014*

*I just love attending the Fish Frys with my clients. The atmosphere is so fun and exciting. My clients know that I cannot cook, so at events like this they teach me how to cook. I always enjoy going to Tampa. Besides the fish fry, I like hearing the NA/AA stories. I love eating the yummy food prepared by tribal members at the fish fry. I noticed that when I travel with my clients to the fish fry events, they become comfortable with me. It was interesting to see the*

*interactions I had with my clients at the fish fry. One of my clients told me that, when a tribal member provides food, the best thing to do is to eat the food out of respect. Dressing down and being myself with my clients has been opening up conversations for us. I noticed that my clients are more open with me at events versus at the office. The events seem to make my clients get comfortable. As long as I attend the fish fry events, I know that my relationship with clients will continue to grow. I love the outdoor events with my clients. Today was a good day!*

Besides attending events, another significant step that I took towards becoming closer to my clients was not asking questions about the culture or bringing up finances. My supervisor guided me to remain curious, but not pushy, about their culture and their finances. The reason it is significant not to discuss finances with tribal clients is because they view outside society as using them for their money. It was brought to my attention that when a tribal client feels comfortable with you, he/she will share about their culture and their finances. The culture is very sacred to them, and only specific information would be shared with me in order for me to understand the clients through their Seminole ways. There has been sacred information shared with me that I am not allowed to share with anyone outside. Trust is a huge aspect of being able to join with tribal clients; however, it does not come easy. According to Flemons (2002):

Your clients need proof of your understanding; they need to know and trust that your grasp of their experience is accurate and in sync with theirs. You thus must do more than simply tell them that you understand. "Right, I know what you're up against"- you need to tell them, through your questions and empathetic comments, exactly what you understand (p. 60).

How I was able to generate a certain level of trust was that I made it clear that I was going to be committed and invested with the Seminole Tribal clients. I began to attend funerals,

ceremonies, and events to get to know the Seminole culture. In order to understand my clients, I had to understand the culture first. It was important for me to receive information instead of asking questions when attending any activities with the tribe. For example, when I attended a funeral with my clients, I remained very curious because of how the funeral was conducted. I followed the structure of the Seminole culture and followed my clients lead about when to walk up to the casket, when to pour dirt on the casket before the individual gets buried, and when was an appropriate time to go to the home of the individual who passed away. My clients educated me on the funeral process while I was at the funeral. They explained details about funerals because I remained quiet and respectful. I did not ask questions about the funeral process, but remained patient and allowed my clients to educate me.

### *Learning without Asking*

When you ask too many questions about the culture and the way things are done within the culture, the tribal clients become very guarded because they assume that the information being asked will be used against them to harm them. I consistently remained respectful and silent and allowed the information to come from my clients. Another great experience I was part of was being invited to a sweat lodge to join a cultural spiritual ceremony. During the sweat lodge, I was very nervous and again I followed the lead of my clients and other tribal members. During the process of the sweat lodge, my clients would whisper in my ear regarding what was taking place and what I needed to do to remain calm and relaxed during the intense prayer rounds. As my clients noticed me becoming nervous, they would speak to me and inform me to lay down on the ground and allow the Mother Nature to cool me down. "It worked!"

Through my experience with tribal clients, I realized that I need to be myself and not present myself as an expert who is seeking information from them about their tribe. Once the

clients discovered that I am not seeking to use their cultural information to cause harm to them, which was established through conversations and spending quality time together outside of the office, the therapeutic relationship transformed powerfully. The difference between receiving information and asking questions was clear; if the tribal members felt comfortable with me, they educated me on the culture. I learned that every time I had to ask a question regarding the culture, my requests were usually denied. Quickly I began to adjust my curiosity by becoming a student and allowing the relationship building process to take place organically and not forced in order for a conversation to take place between myself and a tribal client.

#### *Nature as Context*

In order for me to join with my clients, I decided to begin an outdoor group by going to Las Olas Boulevard every Wednesdays and having casual conversations about life, relationships, problems, etc. I noticed a difference in my clients, as they became open and friendly during our lunch conversations. During the outdoor group, my clients shared with me that they enjoyed the outdoors because it was part of the nature. My clients informed me that they liked seeing me free spirited and not too uptight. They informed me that I needed to allow them to get to know me and not be so guarded with them. During the outdoor group I was able to speak in their language and not so much utilizing therapeutic terminology to allow joining to take place. Flemons (2002) discussed how, “the more our word choices match those of our clients and the more the clients agree with our descriptions of their experience, the fewer the differences between us and, thus, the more concordance “(p. 68). Utilizing client’s language informs the client that we are part of their experience and we understand what they are informing us.



*Journal Entry-May 2015*

*I realized it is the effort and compassion that I apply at work with my clients that allows me to be able to have a comfortable and genuine relationship with them. Since I decided to take them on outdoor groups, I have been able to explore variety of topics with my tribal clients. They mentioned to me that they feel more comfortable being in a comfortable setting. The outdoor groups have provided me with an opportunity to ask questions and receive feedback and information in depth from my clients. I love being outdoors, so it makes sense that my clients enjoy the nature as well. I like to do creative (outside of the box) groups and therapy with my tribal clients because they get bored very easily in a "western" therapeutic approach at an office setting.*

*Cross-cultural Conversations*

A client of mine mentioned that in order for me to get to know their culture, I needed to share about my Armenian culture. They became curious about my culture and begin to share examples about their culture. They wanted to know about Armenia in detail, such as my religion, what type of food I eat, and do I speak Armenian. They asked me to speak in Armenian so they can hear how it sounds. I was able to share some words in Armenian, which allowed for some of my tribal clients to share some words in their native language. They taught me how to say thank you, referring to "shonabish" in the native language. I had a male client who would come to my office every morning and attempt to pronounce a word in Armenian that I taught him and he would later ask me if I remembered how to say specific words in his native language (Miccosukee). It became a fun atmosphere. They were getting to know my Armenian culture as I was getting to understand their Seminole culture. They encouraged me to remain strong in my culture and not forget where I came from.

They discovered that I did not know how to cook, which was shocking to them because Seminole women are great cooks. They challenged me to cook for them even though they knew I could not cook. My non cooking skills became a joke for them and they appeared to enjoy making jokes about me in conversations. Our relationship deepened as we started to spend more time together in casual settings and they were able to have fun and joke around with me.

An experience that further deepened this joining process was attending the Wellness Conference in Marco Island. The event is always in July for one week. Tribal members attend a conference that has sober support meetings, health education, a culture night, and gender specific groups. I was able to spend one week with my clients at the Hilton Hotel by exercising with them every morning, hanging out with them at the pool, and eating together. During the groups that were provided, I was able to sit with my clients and receive valuable information and have further discussions after the groups. When I attended groups with my clients we were able to have further discussions that related to health, family, and overall life concerns. My clients were able to tell me the importance of family connection with the tribe. They were also curious to know about my family and the relationships I had with my siblings. At the Wellness Conference, I was able to be myself with my clients by swimming with them at the pool and on the beach. The reason why I felt so comfortable with my clients is because they invited me to join with them around the pool area and to the beach. While we were at the pool together, I was a bit nervous because I did not want for my clients to see me outside of my work clothes; however when we got to the pool my clients expressed that they wanted to play "marco/polo." It was fun to be part of game with them because at that point I felt that I was the "genuine" Sunny and I was being accepted by my clients to have fun with them. My clients informed me that if they did not want to have me around them or even play with them, they would never invite me. They

informed me that I was being myself and not acting as if I was better than them when I joined with them and played around the pool. I had a wonderful experience being on the beach with my clients and taking pictures of them. We formed memories together, which allowed for all of us to reflect on them several months later after my CEO developed a PowerPoint with the pictures I had taken on the beach.

The last night at the Wellness Conference was an incredible experience that I was able to be part of with my clients. The last night was a dinner night and a party for all the guests. The theme of the party of "The Beetles." My clients and I got dressed up, during the dress up session, we were helping each other with outfits and hair dos. When we arrived to the party, my clients forced me to get on the dance floor. I was so shy to dance in front of my clients, I let my guards down and begin to have fun with them. After the party, my clients stated, "I didn't know you actually have fun outside of the office." They started to laugh and expressed that they had a great time. Attending events with my clients and letting my guards down has allowed me to join with my clients and get invited to be part of their conversations.

*Journal Entry-July 2014*

*Going to Wellness this year is going to be fun. I hope to have a good time with my clients and staff. I'm looking forward to attend the dinner and the party with my clients. Dressing up like the Beetles is going to be exciting. Now that I'm at the Wellness conference, I noticed that I have certain clients who are reaching out to me for guidance and support. Wednesday was fun; we went to the pool (my clients and I) and played marco/polo. I didn't think I was going to be comfortable at first because I was going to wear a swimsuit, however as I got around my clients and we started to play in the pool, I no longer felt uncomfortable. It's amazing how my clients invited me to play with them in the pool. We are building a stronger relationship together by spending time outside of the therapy room.*

*Thursday night was pretty intense for me. I attended a women's meeting and it was difficult for me because I opened up to another level with my clients. During the meeting, the topic was about disappointments and painful experiences in life. When it came to my turn, I got stuck because I was afraid to share about a painful experience with my clients being present in the room. I noticed a client of mine looked at me and gave me the eye to share. It seemed like she gave me the okay to share. I thought to myself, OMG, if my clients find out about a secret that I have kept for some years, they are going to judge me. But, I knew that I needed to get it off my chest and participate in the women's meeting. I felt so comfortable in that room, I let my guards down and shared a personal painful experience. After I shared my story, a client came close to me and provided support. She hugged me and told me that it was okay as my tears came down my eyes. As I am getting ready for bed, I realized that my relationship with my clients has been improving and they have been allowing me to be myself no matter what type of flaws I have.*

*Friday night, what a great event to be part of. As I prepare for the Beatles night dinner/party, I realized that I needed to check in with my clients. I had my Beatles t-shirt on, my hair in a huge afro and make up on like I was ready to party. I walked towards my clients' hotel room to see if they needed any help from me. One of my female clients asked me to do her hair and help her decide what to wear for the party. I enjoyed assisting her with getting prepared for the dinner/party. The female clients and I felt excited to go to the dinner/party. We took several pictures together facing the big mirror in the hotel room. My clients appeared to be so excited with their Beatles theme outfits. It was so good to see my clients smiling. I was glad that they were having fun at the*

*Wellness Conference. As we walked down the hotel hallway, I noticed my male clients walking out of their hotel rooms. The males started to joke around and dance like the Beetles. We all headed towards the hotel elevator. We stepped in the elevator and waited to get to the Lobby area. As we walked in the lobby my clients started laughing and impersonating the Beetles. We took some more pictures in the lobby and headed to the dinner area. The dinner was delicious and the fun part took place. We had the Beetles music playing and my clients dragged me to the dance floor to dance with them. I must say I danced with my clients until midnight. This was one of my favorite events with my clients. I got closer with my clients from this event. I am heading to bed with a smile on my face. Goodnight!*

#### *Emotional Honesty*

One night, I attended the women's group. I was hesitant because I did not want to share too much information about myself in front of my female clients. During the group, I noticed that my female clients were staring at me and encouraging me to share personal battles. As I shared a painful experience with them and began to shed some tears, I received a warm hug from one of my clients. She whispered in my ear to provide love and support. After that day, my relationship with my female clients grew. That allowed us to talk about painful experiences that they battled with. As I learned not to be afraid to show my flaws, it became easier and easier for me to "be myself" with them.

A belief that a majority of my Seminole clients share is that therapists are fake and they pretend they are perfect. I wanted to be able to join with my clients and create a safe setting for them to feel comfortable in. The best way I was able to do that was to share parts of my life with them, so they could get to know me and understand me before they could share about their own

lives. My clients informed me on a regular basis when they thought I was being open and honest with them, and when I was not.

### *Receptive Curiosity*

Tribal members became comfortable with me as I began to apply some of the tools I was taught in school, which included taking a non-expert stance and allowing clients to feel they are the experts of their lives. I approached my clients by being curious and not forcing for them to share about their culture. Because I am not from Florida, I never knew about the Seminole tribe and I was honest with them about that. My clients were shocked that I did not know about them and they began to teach me about their culture. Applying this specific tool created wonders for me because I was able to listen and receive valuable information from tribal clients.

Playing the role of a “student” with my clients created an atmosphere for me to become part of my clients’ shared stories. One day, a group of my clients were having a cookout at their living residence, which is part of their treatment center. Before the cookout, they invited me to attend, so I decided to take some beverages. While I was at the cookout, my clients began to share about their culture and how having everyone involved in cookouts creates a family experience for them in treatment. During the cookout, I was able to join with my clients and share about how my family conducts cookouts. Every time I shared about my culture and my family, my clients shared more about their culture and their families. We developed a relationship that consisted of casual conversations and flows of information provided by my clients. It was significant for me to create an atmosphere to give my clients the freedom to be themselves (Flemons, 2002).

With all this talk about becoming one mind with your clients, I guess I should clarify that you only do this in the service of allowing them to be themselves. Once their appointment

is over, you go onto other clients, to new concordances, and they go home without you.

They may take your suggestions along with them, but not your embodied presence (p. 77).

Presenting myself as non-threatening gave me the opportunity to be accepted by my tribal clients. They made comments to me such as, I was part of their family now since they got to know me. My clients mentioned to me that relationships are very important to their culture and once they develop a relationship with someone, that individual will always be part of their lives unless they lose trust. Building trust is huge when working with tribal members, and trust is gained through genuine conversations. One of my clients showed gratitude and expressed that he trusted me by giving me a gift that was a necklace made out of beads. He informed me that his grandmother made the necklace for me because I was helping him out. Receiving gifts from tribal members is huge because they take the time and effort to give a gift. A client of mine informed me that when a gift is given, to take it. If a therapist declines the gift, the client will feel very disrespected and hurt. I had to learn quickly that when I was given a gift to accept it and keep it in my office as a reminder of the appreciation of my clients.

### *Blending the Personal and the Professional*

Tribal clients are very clever and recognize when someone is working for the money or working because they really enjoy what they are doing. My clients informed me that they can tell that I love my job because I go to events outside of work hours and check up on them on my days off. They would even make comments to me; such as go on a vacation, you seem like you live with us. I will never forget one evening when three of my clients called me and invited me to their apartment for dinner. When I got there, they surprised me with red roses and watched me smile from ear to ear. They said that even though they gave me a hard time, they appreciated me. It meant so much to me and I could not help but become emotional. My clients knew me pretty

well because they made a bet that I was going to become emotional. The reason why they were able to win the bet is because I had been my “true self” with them. I didn’t pretend to be anyone else. I was truthful with them, because I wanted the same from them. I realized how blessed I am to work with such a caring and unique culture. My work environment is truly like a family.

### *Tribal Uniqueness*

It was important for me to keep in mind that the Seminole tribe was not like any other Native American tribe, it was unique. A mistake that a lot of individuals make was presented to me by a tribal member who said that Americans assume that all Native Americans are the same. Because I didn’t know anything about the Seminole tribe prior to working with tribal clients, I stopped myself from assuming and became excited to learn about the culture as I was invited to do so by the tribal clients. The more I learned about the culture, the more effective I was becoming as a clinician because my clients were teaching me how to join with them based on cultural differences. Coming from a different culture, everything about the tribe fascinated me, whether it was watching my clients’ bead necklaces to tasting pumpkin bread made by my clients. I went from watching my clients walk through the doors with beads around their necks to sitting down with them and learning how to bead and create necklaces with them.

I had an older woman as a client who became very close with me and began to share many stories about her life. When I was with her, I listened carefully and provided few comments. She was teaching me about her culture and offered one day to teach me how to bead. She brought in different colors of beads and began to bead in front of me. The next day she invited me to go to her apartment and provided instructions in detail on how to bead. Beading together, we began to bond even more and as we beaded necklaces together, she began to share more about her life and opened up in therapy to a level of sharing about very personal things. If I



wanted to join with my client, I needed to be open to learning how to bead. I discovered that in order to be welcomed to the culture, I needed to remain humble and a student at all times. It all did not happen overnight; being open minded and excited to learn about the culture, but from a gentle approach, gave me the opportunity to join with my clients. I went from being someone from a different culture, to joining with my clients in a common bond of humanity.

The more time I spent with tribal members, the closer I noticed my relationships became with tribal clients. My clients informed me that I was not just an employee, but also an incentive to them due to spending time with them outside of business hours. A clinician who is interested to work with tribal members needs to keep in mind that it is not a nine to five job. A clinician must be very flexible and accessible in order to form any type of ongoing relationship with tribal clients. I attended funerals with my clients and even the funerals of clients that I worked with. It was very difficult to witness a prior client get buried; however, showing my respect to that client spoke volumes for the family.

### *Tribal Grieving*

I am not afraid to show my emotions if I want my clients to show their emotions. Attending funerals increased my knowledge about understanding the Seminole culture. In 2013, I built a strong bond with a client through our many conversations together. I accepted the individual as he was. The client said he did not feel judged by me, and my non-expert stance gave him permission to speak to me about secrets that he kept for many years. About ten months later, this client was in the hospital. I received a phone call from his mother and she asked me to visit him in the hospital because he was not doing too well. I spoke to him over the phone and told him that I was going to visit him. Before I was able to make it to the hospital, he passed away. I attended his funeral and met his family. His mother hugged me and cried on my

shoulder. We began to cry together. It was a very difficult experience. The family mourned for four days, which is part of the culture. I recognized the importance of showing love and support to the family, which was meaningful to the family. I continue to keep in contact with the family, and will do so as long as they allow me to. The tribe experiences a lot of losses of tribal members, and a lot of these have to do with alcohol and drug abuse. Providing support for those who are in such need is significant.

The CEO of my company and I developed a grief support group for both the Big Cypress reservation and Hollywood reservation in 2014. Every other week we would travel about two hours to the Big Cypress reservation and conduct a grief support group for tribal women. During our group, we were all honest and open with each other. We developed a small circle of support that we continue to reach out to and keep contact with. From the group, I met many tribal women who taught me about the culture. I learned about the grief process, I learned about the roles of women within the tribe, and I learned about trust. We were all able to develop trust through our grief group, which allowed for all of us to share painful memories sitting around in a circle and crying with one another. We were all also able to wipe our tears and create new memories together that lead to hope. Having the opportunity to be part of a group that developed ongoing relationships with tribal women was priceless.

To further discuss my therapeutic skills and relationships with tribal clients, I decided to share interviews conducted with two tribal members who have observed me as a therapist with tribal clients from a distance. They also saw me and my interactions, at tribal events outside of a therapy room, and heard how members of the tribe perceived my presence with the tribe.

*Interviews with Two Tribal Members*

I interviewed two tribal members to confirm and discuss my commitment and tools that I applied with tribal clients. I also asked them to speak about any concerns that they may have had with the specific approaches I utilized when working with tribal members. A total of six questions were asked to the two tribal members to analyze their responses. The two tribal members were a male associate of mine, and a female administrator within the tribe.

*Inviting Therapy*

The male interviewee reported that once a tribal member seeks therapy, he/she is opening the door for an invitation to the therapist. The female interviewee reported that a therapist is invited mainly by a client who is involuntary requesting therapeutic services, based on legal or dependency case involvements. I further asked about tribal clients who are seeking therapy voluntarily, such as how a therapist may get invited then. She responded, "They would have to see the need that they have, and go, and so you know in a..., a lot of times we do have people that would walk in the office and say I just need to talk to somebody. Not that they're really seeking the therapist, and I think they eventually hook up with a therapist, but a lot of times it's just like going in there thinking that they, you know, they just want to talk to somebody (F.I.018)...And then become more involved that way. (F.I.020)

It is important to think about the therapy process as a relationship rather than motivation (Flemons, 2002). Flemons (2002) stated, "Rather than worrying about your clients' inner motivation, attend to how they are relating or orienting to therapy" (p. 97). Listening to clients becomes significant to distinguish what type of services the clients are searching for regardless of being forced to be in therapy based on the tribal clients. Flemons (2002) stated,

Some clients are asking for help, but they aren't sure about you or about the kind of therapy you are offering. They may be held back by the risks or inconvenience involved in changing, or they may be holding inaccurate assumptions about what you'll be wanting them or not needing them to do—assumptions that may be shutting them down or that will overly restrict your freedom. Whatever the case, you'll want to look for ways of inviting a relationship between them and therapy that opens possibilities for change (p. 97).

### *The Research Narrative Weave*

I asked both of these interviewees the same six questions so I could examine the similarities and differences in their observations. The six questions are:

1. What may a family therapist do to get invited to navigate a foreign system?
2. What works with tribal members to be open to therapy?
3. What do tribal members think of therapy?
4. What does not work in therapy with tribal members?
5. What are some things I as a family therapist with tribal member need to do to improve?
6. How can a therapist like me make the therapy process with tribal members become smoother?

While these questions were specifically designed to research aspects of the relationship between this systemic family therapist and clients within the Seminole tribal culture, the responses to the questions seem more informative and enlightening when woven together within a narrative rather than parsed out as separate themes. Presenting the research material this way is more in keeping with what is most in keeping with the tribal tradition of contextualizing wisdom and ideas within narratives so they can be more effectively shared by individuals within the tribe.

### *Seeking Therapy*

Based on the responses provided by the interviewers, my interpretation for question number one is there has to be a need for the tribal member, which creates a process for the therapist to get involved by the invitation of the tribal member. The invitation may vary for therapists based on the rapport that is built between the therapist and the client, which will be discussed further in the study. A tribal member seeking therapy is not necessarily all that different from a member of non-tribal culture in the U.S. There is simply recognition of the need for some kind of help and the process of seeking that help does not seem to be any more or less complicated than in any other non-tribal climate. It is significant for a therapist to keep in mind that “we do not assume that we have in our possession or at our disposal any special problem-solving strategies or meditation practices that are appropriate to the culture and to the circumstances of these communities” (White, 2003, p. 22).

Based on my experience with tribal clients, what has worked for me is spending time with clients outside of the office, being fully committed in ways that are recognizable to members of the tribal community, building trust, and being accessible. The interviewers provided in-depth answers to question number two: What works with tribal members to be open to therapy?

(M.I.012): Umm, for me, I can only answer for myself with that question, umm, I was at a point in my life where, umm, I needed to, to change in order for me to, umm, to have a better life, and so I think with any other member, tribal member coming into working with therapy, they would, that, that I would think, that would be the, um, that would be what, what brings them into therapy. Is that they want to talk, they want to become aware or, yeah, uh, they want to, uh, be, uh, get education, get feedback, educated feedback, and

so when someone, um, like I said before, if the person is seeking therapy, then they already made up their mind they were already open minded enough to say hey, umm, maybe I could I should speak to someone who has knowledge in this area and so.

### *Socially Joining*

I further explored with the male interviewer regarding tribal clients who are forced to seek therapy, what would work for that group. He reported that tribal members who are forced to seek therapy may be a challenge; however he reported:

(M.I. 016): Um, I think what helps is that if someone, if the therapist is, um, how could I say this, is just, has a pleasing manner. The way that they talk, the way the body language, just being, being, umm, I guess it would have a lot to do with body language, when you approach somebody, umm, the way that you put your hand out, um, the way that you sit, the way that you face somebody, you just, you kind of show that you're, that you're, that you want them to be open with you and so you kind of, um, have a relaxed posture and I would think that might help somebody say ok, this person is not here to interrogate me and, um, maybe also just, um, asking questions, maybe outside of being a therapist. It just kind of helps them warm up a little bit, sort of speak. (018)... You know, how was your day, you know, um, you know, what did you think about, um, the football game, just kind of maybe make somebody feel a little bit at ease 'cause, um, I've seen people do that and somebody could be really angry and then somebody could say, oh hey, what do you think about that? And it just totally throws (Laughter), it throws it for a loop and they want to be angry but then they're like, well, hey, you know, that's a, I want to be able to answer that question. Before you know it, they're not maybe so angry or so standoffish with somebody, so.

### *Trust*

The female interviewee provided her ideas of what works with tribal members to be open to therapy, which is trust. Trust is essential to transform a symptomatic trance into one that is therapeutic. The therapist seeks to find those conditions that will enable clients to realize that it is safe for them to explore their experience” (Gellligan, p. 343). Trust allows a person to let go-unconscious experience to take over. A person that does not trust will battle with the trance experience. The female interviewee stated,

Trust. I think that they have to develop a trust with the person that the therapist. So they don't open up so easily or also, we don't open up so easily to just anybody. Just because you're a therapist, doesn't mean that I'm going to walk in, oh, you have my best interest, you know. (F.I. 023)

The effectiveness of therapy may be measured by the relationship formed between the client and the therapist. Bonding, providing empathy, and support have been helpful tools for me when working with tribal clients. Bonding does not come easily, however, when it comes, it becomes organic once I am able to put my pen and paper aside and look my clients in their eyes and closely hear every word coming out of their mouths.

Listening and hearing are two different factors in the process of therapy. What I realized with my clients is I can listen, but I most need to hear what they are saying to me. Not being afraid to ask for clarification has been very helpful for me. It allowed for my clients to correct me and educate me more about their stories. Suzuki (2006) stated, “When you say something to someone, he may not accept it, but do not try to make him understand it intellectually. Do not argue with him; just listen to his objections until he himself finds something wrong with them” (p. 108). Don't force ideas on people allow them to discover it their own and in the process of it

join with them and think with them. I have learned that it is okay to not know everything or act like I know everything. A client of mine expressed to me that he respects that I tell him I don't know certain things because no one really knows everything. It made clear sense to me. Staying genuine with myself to my clients has created that safe and trusting environment.

(F.I. 025): And you, and start opening up to you. I think it takes a little time, uh, to, and I don't know, you know I can't say what it's like with the outside world and you know other clients that go to therapists, you know, and I'm sure it's the same, you know that they had to build that trust with that client first. But that's what I see. Uh, umm, we, working, uh, in a setting like we have where we have therapists that our clients come in to see, it takes a long time for them to develop that comfort that they need to be able to open up. And so they use to get upset all the time because they would say that, you know, you just get use to them and get comfortable around them and start telling them stuff and they're gone.

### *History and Commitment*

The female interviewee and I explored the issue of tribal members not opening up to therapy due to the lack of commitment from the therapist. In the context of the tribe, clients are used to the therapist being very time limited and they expect to be "hurt" or "disappointed" because they know that the "outsider" will leave. There are some powerful parallels to "regular" therapy with non-tribal clients who also fear abandonment by their therapist. There are also unique situations in the context of tribe that need to be accounted for, where white people have a long history of leaving tribal members high and dry after getting what they want. This information about the history makes sense of why tribal clients feel sensitive to any lack of commitment from their therapists. The fear of not trusting white people surfaces from the history of the Seminole culture. The unique parameters of this kind of "abandonment" when working



with the context of the tribe is significant because of the sensitivity for this group based on past experiences with white people. Tribal clients have it in their mind that their therapist is going to abandon them and clients who go in with this idea and actually experience hurt and disappointment by a therapist confirms their ideas about therapy. It becomes more difficult every time they meet a new therapist.

Because of abandonment issues with therapists, it can be very challenging to develop a relationship with tribal members, especially when the therapist is white. The thoughts about whites have been instilled with tribal members since they were very young and when they experience abandonment from a therapist, their perspective about therapy continues to remain the same. Every client has asked me some variation of the questions “How long are you going to work here? Are you going to leave us?” The fear of being abandoned is so deep that it takes some time to show that I am going to work with them long term. Although I am trained as a brief therapist, time has a different value in the Seminole tribal context. Tribal clients require long term therapy because it takes time to build trust and show commitment to the clients. Working with tribal clients for two years has showed them that I am committed and I invested in them. In order for them to be invested in therapy, I need to be invested as well. Ending relationships are difficult for tribal members; however, ending relationships overall are difficult for all human kind.

### *Initiation and Continuity*

My female interviewee provided an explanation for how lack of commitment causes tribal members to shut down and not be open to the next therapist. When the clients know that the therapist is not going to be an insider, the chances of becoming comfortable and accepting therapy becomes unlikely. For a therapist to do any kind of therapy in an environment where

clients do not see the therapist as an insider can be very challenging because the clients are guarded and not open to starting the process of therapy due to disappointments and abandonment experiences with past therapist.

(F.I. 037): What I see is it really takes a long term for people, for our people, to really build that trust because they had so much mistrust in their life, all along throughout. You know, whether it's family members or, you know, other people in their lives, they have a lot of mistrust and so when they start feeling comfortable with you and then all of the sudden you say well, you know, what I'm, I got two more weeks here and then I'm gone.

Knowing that I will never be an "insider," tribal clients will share as much as they feel the therapist needs to know. This only changed once they became comfortable and realized that I was committed, based on the effort I put in with them. The effort that my clients wanted to see is for me to attend events with them and become invested with them by remaining part of their lives after the termination of therapy. I learned that after the termination of clients, it is significant to remain in contact with clients when they reach out. My clients have my cell phone number, in order for them to be able to have access to me whenever they need to talk to me or reach out for support. In the traditional world of therapy, I was taught not to give my private phone number to clients; however with tribal clients not giving my cell phone number to them will inform them that I do not want them close to me. As I mentioned earlier tribal clients are all about relationships, once they feel that I care about working with them and allow them to get close to me, they too become closer to me. As a therapist I need to allow them part of my life if I want to be able to learn anything about my clients.

*Tribal Members' Views of Therapy*

For two years, I have provided clinical services to tribal members and I was always curious, what do tribal members think of therapy? Interviewing two tribal members was my best route to discover insights and satisfy my curiosity. The interviewers reported the following:

(M.I. 025): Umm, for me, I think that, umm, this could apply to any group of people. Some people feel like they don't need help and some people are open to it. Umm, a friend of mine, his older brother, this is really good example. My friend, he's in recovery and his older brother tells him that I don't need recovery and I don't need a therapist. You, when I was in my day and age, we didn't have therapists, so it, for him, it was just a matter of being strong willed, so I think that since we're talking about the tribe, there are some people that are gonna be of the same thought. They're probably gonna say, when I was growing up we didn't talk about these things, so maybe we don't need to talk about it with a therapist now, or some people, it could just be a matter of just being thinking that having a strong will, will be able to get you to do things rather than just being open with somebody versus.

(F.I. 045): They don't like it (Laughter). They don't and you know, it's like a getting into my business, why? You know, it's none of your business. And you know, as a therapist, you're gonna sit there and you're going to ask questions and maybe not so much questions about them, but questions about what they're saying. (F.I. 047) You know and so, like I said, it takes a long time for them to build that trust and once they do build that trust, they are more willing to tell you everything about themselves, you know, and they will forever tell you everything about them.

I agree with her statement about once they build trust with the therapist, they tell the therapist everything. I have experienced the majority of my clients sharing a lot of information. Even when they leave treatment, they will call me and share with me even more things. When trust has been developed with my clients, it has been such an amazing experience. Instead of receiving only “surface” information about my clients, they share everything about their lives, from abuse, to self-esteem issues, to suicide attempts. The deeper they begin to share, the closer our bond becomes, and it is important to be gentle with the information I have with my clients because I do not want them to feel that their information is going to be used against them. That is a fear many clients have. However, when they realize that they have that trust with me, they no longer fear me hurting them, disappointing them, or abandoning them.

Once a family therapist has trust with a tribal client, a journey develops and the client and the therapist may explore possibilities through trust, commitment, and compassion. A journey begins with developing the trusting relationship that allows my clients to begin sharing about their addictions, leading to discussing any form of abuse, sharing about marital problems, self-esteem issues, or grief, which are huge issues among tribal members. Co-dependency, and sharing about guilt and shame also has a strong hold on them. This process was formed through many hours of conversations outside of business hours, whether by having lunch with a client or attending an event and having the opportunity to join. It is important to keep in mind that commitment and compassion are seen very clearly by the clients, and not just during “working hours”.

*What Does Not Work**Finances*

I was familiar with what was working for me with the tribal clients in therapy, and for the most part this was confirmed by the interviewees above. However, I also wanted to know what does not work in therapy with tribal members. The responses I got are noted below:

(M.I. 029): Umm, I think that probably, could just if somebody is not really ready, just don't force the issue. I think it's common sense. I would think (laughter), you know. Just don't force them. Uhh, but then again, it could be certain questions. I know for me, umm, finances. Don't talk finances with people.

My experience with tribal clients and discussing finances has been awkward. I was told once not to discuss it and I never furthered the conversation. I was informed of this by my supervisor and clients. During supervision, my supervisor told me that tribal members do not like discussing their finances. Several of my clients mentioned to me that outsiders only deal with them because they have money, and they can tell who is genuine about having a relationship with them, which was when money is not a topic of a conversation. My clients informed me that when someone begins to ask about their dividends, they no longer associate with that individual because they know their true intentions.

The male interviewee shared more about avoiding discussing about finances with clients. Therapists should keep in mind that tribal members view outsiders as wanting to get to know them only because they have money. Therefore, it is important to be genuine during the therapy process and avoid asking about how much money they make. Once the client feels comfortable with you, he/she will share on this if necessary.

(M.I. 031): Umm, only because that, umm, it, for me it's a privacy issue. I really don't want people knowing how, you know, to know how much money I make or how much money I get. It's really nobody else's business and if you look at it from a point of view that when I sit down and I talk to somebody, I don't ask them what they make or, you know, but of course, everyone knows that you know that the Seminole Tribe, umm, is it, uh, has a gaming system in place, excuse me, has a gaming system in place and it has afforded individual tribal members the ability to live a little bit better than the average citizen here in Florida. So, what does not work with, I think that probably would be the first thing is to not approach somebody with the thought that you know this person makes a lot of money or to approach somebody, maybe ask them, umm, what it's like to live on the reservation or, you know, just ask them about money. I think those, those would probably be two things that I think you wouldn't want to ask them about. (Laughter)

#### *Forcing Sexual Disclosures*

The female interviewee reported that being a “pushy therapist” does not work with tribal members. She emphasized about not pressuring tribal clients to share about sexual abuse. She stated,

(F.I. 059): Like I said, it's more of a comfort thing that I see in our people that they need to start feeling comfortable because they're not going to sit there and say, you know, I was molested by my father, first thing. I mean, some people might be at that place, but I find that with our people, they're not upfront with those things. The sexual abuse goes on in our families are deep, deep, deep, dark, dark, dark secrets that everybody would rather take to their grave because they don't want their, them, to anybody to know that their

uncle or their father or whoever molested them. You know. Listening is an important tool in the therapy process. White (2003) discussed the significance of listening, Listening can never be considered a neutral activity, and team members face special responsibilities as they listen to the expressions of community members in the context of these consultations. This is a responsibility for establishing the listening context as one in which these expression of pain and distress are heard and acknowledged, but not in the way that limits these expressions to the revisiting of trauma through familiar signs. This is also a responsibility to establish the listening context as one in which accounts of failure, hopelessness, incompetence, and despair are heard and acknowledged, but not in a way that contributes further to identity of their family or their community (p. 33)

### *Tribal Discretions*

Money and sexual abuse are particularly sensitive issues with the Seminole Tribe. Working with this tribal population, these concepts are different from non-tribal clients. With non-tribal clients, asking about finances is not so much of a major issue. With tribal clients, it is a deal breaker. Tribal clients want the therapist to get to know them and not be so focused on how much money they receive every month. Tribal clients have shared with me that their relationships with outsiders always appear to be about money.

As far as sexual abuse, tribal members are very hesitant to share this type of information. Clients that I have worked with have shared about their sexual abuse only because they expressed to me that they felt comfortable and not judged. I have had a client share with me about sexual abuse during an intake process; however, she expressed that she already talked about it before so it was not a secret anymore, but yet very difficult. I have also had clients who have shared about sexual abuse for the first time ever in life and felt that they felt a form of

relief, but yet so much shame came from it. It has not been an easy task to explore about sexual abuse; however, I do not force the process, but allow for my clients to provide details based on their readiness. White (2003) discussed about special considerations and appropriate ways of addressing pain and trauma.

There is a commonly held and highly influential idea that is a psychological pain and emotional distress that is the 'natural' outcome of social trauma in much the same way that physical pain is in the natural outcome of physical trauma. This idea is usually coupled with conception of this psychological pain and emotional distress as substances- the presence of which can be measured in quantitative terms-that are stored under pressure in a psychological or an emotional system in much the same way that fluid is compressed in an hydraulic system or that steam builds a head of pressure in a steam engine (p. 38).

Therefore, it is important to be mindful of the connection between trauma and psychological pain and emotional distress (White, 2003). White (2003) stated, "It is through a questioning of naturalistic understanding of trauma and its consequences in people's lives that space is opened for the appreciation of the complexities of people's response to trauma" (p. 43).

### *The Process of Respect*

Respecting where the clients are, and not being pushy, will guide the therapy process. Questions explored with tribal clients will be answered; however, it is a process instead of getting the answers out of the clients. It is a slower process for tribal members than for the outside society to get things "out on the table." My supervisor consistently informed me that it takes some time for clients to feel comfortable with therapy and how much they share. The process of tribal members sharing things takes time due to the trust concept with outsiders. They



first have to know that they can trust their therapist. Once that is clear, they have to be able to bond with the therapist. Trust can be present; however, if there is no connection with the therapist, a lot of worthy information may be excluded during therapy sessions. The outside society may be viewed as straightforward, getting things off our chest and feel better about it; however, in order for a tribal member to get things off their chest, they have to make sure that whatever they are sharing is not going to be used against them. My clients informed me that there have been cases where they have shared things with non-tribal members and it has backfired on them. Therefore, they are very cautious how much they share. It is through structuring conversations to provide opportunities for clients to express regarding values, beliefs frustration, despair, notions of healing, purposes, hopes, dreams, knowledge of life, spirituality and so on (White, 2003).

There is a process within a process; to get things out on the table is a process within itself. Taking the time with tribal clients is essential, which connects to the aspect of commitment. In order to continue to get invited to navigate this system, I must improve my weaknesses and learn how I may be more effective with tribal members. Question number five was “What are some things I as a family therapist with tribal member need to do to improve?” The responses of the interviewees are noted below:

(M.I. 064): Umm. For me, I really don't think that you, you know, for me, like I said, I can be biased because I've known you and I do know you, that I really don't think that you need any improvements. It's just the way, that the way your personality is, it, it seems to kind of help people be a little bit more comfortable. So that works in your favor. (M.I. 066)  
 ...Rather than, rather than having a need for improvement, you already have, umm, just you just have a way of just making, just somebody just feel comfortable.

The female interviewee informed me that I need to work on my boundaries with tribal clients; she has viewed me at events as a little too friendly. She emphasized the importance of letting clients know that I am the therapist. She reported that I can approach the clients and inform them,

(F.I 073) “You know, and maybe one day when all of this is said and done, we might be friends, and stuff like that, where we might could hang or whatever, but no, you know, I’m not your friend, I’m your therapist and I need to help you through this process.” It is important to set clear boundaries with tribal clients in order for them to understand and become familiar with the therapy process. She further responded, (F.I. 081) “I think you need to put those boundaries up and like I said, I know that you have to be open so that they can get open, but there’s that boundary.” As I shared earlier, it is significant to open up to my clients; however, having a balance in the process is a key.

The female interviewee came from the same approach as the “Western” therapy model provides the guidelines of remaining ethical and professional within the codes of ethics. I understand the ethics regarding the therapeutic relationship by remaining close to the code of ethics and standards. According to Nugent & Jones, (2009), “Dual or multiple relationships refer to counselors engaging in nonprofessional interactions or relationships (i.e. outside of counseling sessions) with current or former clients. Traditionally, counselors were advised to avoid dual/multiple relationships whenever possible” (p. 22). I am open to the female interviewee’s advice regarding setting boundaries with clients; however based on my experience with my tribal clients I broke those boundaries that I was trained and found it beneficial for me and my clients. Remaining in a box and not being able to explore with my clients pertaining their culture and

activities that they invited me to attend, I would not have earned my trusting role with my clients as their therapist.

Nugent and Jones (2009) stated, "Recent ethics scholars change their notion and say that dual/multiple relationships, sometimes known as boundary crossings, are normal and can actually be meaningful in the counseling relationship, particularly in rural or certain cultural communities" (p. 22). Working with the Seminole tribe, I had to change my approach with therapy and overall attentiveness with the tribal clients and meet their needs based on their interests with the process of getting engaged in therapy. Attending the events and breaking boundaries that I was trained in helped me get further with my clients based on their context. I am not vouching to break the codes of ethics; however if a specific culture requires a different approach to get the therapeutic relationship joined and work towards building a relationship stepping outside of my traditional set of boundaries within the "Western" family therapy field is beneficial. I was able to develop a healthy relationship with my tribal clients by not remaining in a conventional mindset and allowing me to become open minded with this particular culture.

### *Open Mindedness*

I became very curious about what the male interviewee meant about my personality because I have experienced that the clients I worked with connect with me easily; however I did not want to think so highly of myself, so therefore I wanted to hear how the interviewee viewed my personality. He stated,

(M.I. 070): Umm, you seem, umm, open minded. Open mindedness that goes a long way with people. When you don't, when you don't have a, when you don't have a set of ideas, set ideas about a person or a group of people, umm, that to me, that, that always helps. And

you don't seem to have that, you don't, you've always seemed open minded and willing to help, to help people.

The idea of open mindedness as a general principle for doing good therapy work creates an opportunity for clients to open up. I noticed myself connecting and joining with my clients by remaining open minded as much as possible. I experienced good therapy taking place when I did not have to force answers or think so hard about the next question, but yet remain open minded, which always allowed therapeutic conversation to flow. Remaining open minded has allowed me to better understand my clients from the lenses of the Seminole culture. Open mindedness has presented opportunities for my clients to become interested in educating and teaching me about them through their cultural values and beliefs. Being open minded gave me the opportunity to approach my clients in a gentle manner compared to the pushy therapist that gets blocked every time.

Opening up to my clients has included sharing my Armenian culture with them, my values, my belief system, personal life struggles that I have overcome, and my upbringings. My clients ask me about my life and they seek to want to learn about myself as much as I want to learn about them. I find it interesting because they become invested in our therapeutic relationship and express that they desire to keep in contact even when therapy is done because they have developed a trusting bond with me. As far as setting boundaries with my clients, what the female interviewee meant about having boundaries is that I know I can get emotionally connected with my clients at times and I become too caring, which creates for some of my clients a dependent mentality.

My caring comes from my upbringing; my mother has always taught me to be a very caring person and the caring factor has been something that comes up in therapy for me. I must

admit, it has been helpful for me to join with my clients because they notice the caring part about me. However, when it comes to the professional field, professionals may not agree with me being too caring with clients. I noticed several experiences when I had female clients who became very close with me and they became jealous of other clients who requested attention from me. Setting clear boundaries with my clients is significant. If I was too focused on setting boundaries, I would have and missed the big picture, which is for my clients to feel comfortable with me by getting to know me. Without this, I do not think my tribal clients would have allowed me to join with them and navigate their system. If I had kept conventional “boundaries” I would not have received the depth of information I did from my clients. They would have viewed me as “just doing my job”.

*The Flow of the Therapy Process with Tribal Members*

The final question was how a therapist like me can make the therapy process with tribal members become smoother. The male interviewee reported that longevity is important because it illustrates commitment. He also discussed the age of a therapist. He reported that tribal clients appear to be more comfortable with younger clinicians because it makes people easier to approach. He identified younger clinicians as “being open minded and open to learning” (M.I. 094).

Furthermore, the female interviewee reported the following: (F.I. 087) “Well, like I said, in doing, in going through the process, slowing the process, not pressuring, you know, letting things come out, and the good thing about it is that we have a longer time with our clients. We don’t have to do it in 28 days. (F.I. 091) ...So that you can take that that time and not pressure. I think that’s the whole thing is the pressure that they, they sometimes feel like that they’re under and have to get the stuff out and they’re not ready to.”

This is very informative because, in my experience with the U.S. culture, therapy has been taught to me as a brief, “fix it” model. Get straight to the solutions and waste no time. Brief therapy as a 12 session model will not work with tribal members because they will feel rushed, especially when a number of sessions are presented to them. In a tribal context where continuity with tradition requires a long-term view, tribal members will feel that they are not important if they are rushed and the task of the therapist is to complete their job. Brief therapy can be viewed as a job by tribal clients, who have continued to express to me their desire to have therapists working with them who are invested and committed. Tribal members will find brief therapy in the 12-session sense very offensive. Again they will feel hurt and disappointment, which all connects back to what I discussed earlier about abandonment. It takes a process for tribal members to open up to therapy and to rush the process can be very detrimental for people from a culture where time is more of a process than a sequence. The name “brief therapy” itself is a dangerous term to utilize with tribal members, since it sounds so rushing and pushy.

Concluding the interviews, I explored with both individuals what has worked for me with tribal clients that have allowed me to interact with them and navigate their system. The interviewees’ perspectives about my work as a therapist was that I am committed, open to learning, and open minded. Having the opportunity to interview these two tribal members confirmed that my role as a therapist with tribal clients was an unforgettable experience.

Being able to conduct interviews with tribal members is not an easy task; however, as I mentioned earlier, it is all about building trust, which forms relationships. In order to receive honest feedback about the therapy process with tribal members and how to navigate this foreign system, it was only right to go to the source. Through my experience as a trained “Western” family therapist I have been exposed to the ethical codes to guide me in the process of remaining

professional; however working with the Seminole tribe, I have stepped outside of my “western” family therapy trainings and taken the risk to connect with this specific culture. Having multiple relationships with clients is an ethical issue associated with common contemporary practice concerns; however breaking those boundaries have been beneficial for me to be effective with tribal clients (Wilicoson, Remley, & Gladding, 2012). It is not appropriate in the “Western” family therapy ethical, legal, and professional guidelines to attend funerals, events, sweat lodges, fish fry, etc.; however based on my experience with my tribal clients attending those specific events have created opportunities for me to get closer to my clients and take our therapeutic relationship to a deeper level of joining and building relationships. *Summary*

The findings of this study were constructed from the researcher’s journal reflections about her experiences as a therapist with Seminole tribal clients, and the perceptions of two tribal members and their understanding about what works and what does not work in therapy with tribal members. Also, the open-ended interview questions focused on the two tribal members’ perceptions of therapy and the challenges therapists may face when working with tribal clients. In an open and expressive manner, the interviewees shared honest opinions about what tribal members think about therapy, and how they understood some of the difficulties tribal members have sharing in therapy due to a lack of commitment from therapists. The reasons for this perception included difficulty with establishing rapport and dealing with a unique culture that is guarded with the outside world.

A significant theme that emerged was the study of how the “universal” values of commitment, openness, respect, and curiosity can be applied to a culture that is so guarded due to its historical relations with outsiders. The perception was primarily attributed to trust building

in the therapy process with tribal clients. Also, the perception of the clients as experts and the therapist taking an open minded stance when working with tribal members was emphasized.

I was able to engage this population in unconventional ways. In order to disengage with my tribal clients when it is time for me to leave my position at the agency is to remain mindful of the process. I plan on speaking to each tribal client in an outdoor setting such as a restaurant and provide detail regarding my decision. What I have learned from my tribal clients is to remain open and honest with them. They respect me more when I am honest with them versus disengaging with them by informing them that I am moving on and giving my two week notice. I want to build a safe environment for my clients to be able to ask me questions regarding my decision in order for them to have the opportunity to process their thoughts and feelings with me. In order for the next "outsider" to work with tribal clients it is significant to remain honest and genuine based on decision making that may impact the therapeutic relationship.

The study provides information about how to connect and build relationships with tribal members that has not been fully articulated in the research literature, and which confirms the usefulness of this study. In Chapter V, the researcher will review the findings and share perceptions of these results. In addition, implications for the practice and future research on therapy with the Seminole tribal members are addressed.



## CHAPTER V

*Summary of the Findings*

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine the process of a family therapist entering and then navigating the cultural system of working with substance abusing Seminole tribal clients. As noted in the interview questions and responses, the research presented guidelines such as providing compassion, empathy, sympathy, attending events with tribal clients, and family therapists to follow when working with tribal members. Because there has been no study conducted with family therapists providing clinical services to tribal members, this study introduced tools, such as joining with tribal clients by participating in tribal events, providing compassion, and remaining open minded about the unique culture from a student stance for clinicians to keep in mind and utilize when working with tribal clients. The interviews illustrated what specific routes therapists may take with tribal clients in order to join and connect. Such as going to fish fry events, tribal sober support conferences, participating in sweat lodges, going to tribal fairs, and son on. This study provided the field of family therapy an opportunity to become familiar with the Seminole tribe, and guidelines of how to remain mindful when working with this unique population. These results were supplemented by the researcher providing personal reflections on her experiences with tribal clients.

Establishing rapport with tribal clients can be difficult for therapists due to the therapist's lack of knowledge about Seminole culture. Therefore, in order to join with tribal clients, the importance of getting to know the culture was shown by the therapist remaining curious about her clients and the culture. Taking a gentle approach with tribal clients and moving the therapy process in a sequence of time allowed for the tribal clients to become comfortable with the therapy process. I didn't know anything about the Seminole tribe prior to working there. In short order I stopped myself from assuming things about the culture, and became excited to learn

about it. The more I learned about the culture from my clients, the more effective I became as a clinician because my clients were teaching me how to join with them based on cultural differences.

I transformed from being a “therapist” who thought that they knew exactly what had to be done and how with my clients, to a “student” willing to learn about whatever my clients were open to teaching me about their Seminole culture. I showed how remaining open minded and attending variety of events gave me opportunities to connect and join with my clients that simply would not be available if I maintained my stance on “boundaries” from my mainstream training.

This idea of taking the role of a student with tribal clients can be generalized to working with other human beings besides the members of the Seminole tribe. Becoming genuinely interested in wanting to learn about clients will open up pathways for therapists to get invited to learn many important things about their clients. It is significant to not approach clients as if the therapists “know it all.” Allow the clients to help you understand them.

Further, the findings showed how allowing clients to teach therapists illustrates what happens when good therapy is taking place. It is significant to keep in mind that clients are the experts of their lives. Taking a student role allows therapists to receive information from the clients without forcing them to produce answers. I was able to illustrate how I was able to receive information from my clients by interacting with them in different settings besides the therapy room. I was able to be myself and have open conversations about life. I was not afraid to openly discuss my own issues to create an atmosphere for my tribal clients to share about their fears, pain, shame, and etc. Once my clients noticed that I was open to sharing about myself, they became comfortable with sharing about themselves. The process of sharing with my clients created a safe environment for my clients to invite me to listen to their stories and learn about

their culture. In order to understand a Seminole client, therapists must understand the culture first.

Another significant finding was how important it was to create an environment where the clients have the ability to work towards trusting the therapist. There are seemingly a lot of universal “human” similarities in the process of gaining someone’s trust as a therapist. Gaining someone’s trust is a process, which cannot be rushed. It is based on developing a relationship with clients, and there is no specific formula that allows for therapy to take place. In some very fundamental ways, the process of effective therapy with tribal clients is not so different from that with non-tribal clients. Building trust with clients appears to be a universal concept in the context of therapy.

As shown in this study, spending time with my clients outside of regular business hours developed a bonding atmosphere between my clients and me. Getting to know my clients outside of an office setting allowed for me to understand their culture and their interests. Working towards joining with my clients, the findings illustrated the importance of a therapist to be genuine. Also by sharing about me allowed for my clients to become comfortable in therapy.

The Seminole culture is guarded with non- tribal members; however with building trust through commitment, opportunities will open up for therapists to join with tribal clients. Tribal clients start to share in therapy when they become comfortable with the therapist. Additionally, the interviews that were conducted with two tribal members confirmed the tools I utilized when getting invited to work with tribal clients. The interviewees confirmed the importance of family therapists to be open to when conducting therapy services with tribal members. The key factor of therapy is, it is a process, not a plan.

*Limitations of the Study*

The research presented here has several limitations. The limitations of this study are that the researcher selected two tribal members, rather than more, to conduct the interviews about the therapy process in the tribal culture. I selected only these two because they offered the best blend of professional and tribal perspectives. Furthermore, since the researcher is a licensed mental health counselor and a graduate student in the field of family therapy, this bias serves a limitation to this study. Further, I focused the study on substance abuse tribal clients, which limits the overall Seminole population who are seeking therapy.

*Contributions to the Field*

The study presents an opening for the field of family therapy to become curious about a unique tribe that allows therapists to get invited to work with it. As long as commitment and trust are formed by therapists, tribal clients will invite therapist to join their life stories. This study further supports the idea that tribal clients can open up to the outside society as long as the clinician is committed, not pushy, and open minded.

My narrative accounting of my process, the interview responses, and my personal reflections offer a significant contribution to the field of family therapy by presenting valuable guidelines to apply when working with Seminole tribal clients. It is my hope that the study influences and informs therapists on how to become comfortable with navigating foreign and/or seemingly closed human relationship systems, at both the family and cultural levels. .

Demonstrating the skills of commitment, building trust, and remaining open-minded, provided this therapist unique opportunities to experience a meaningful therapeutic relationship with Seminole tribal clients. My experience working with tribal clients offered me an

opportunity to apply the above skills to not only with tribal clients, but to all other human beings in the context of talking about difficult, painful, and shameful things.

### *Reflections of the Study*

The concept of “time” in therapy is significant because it allows for clients to become comfortable before sharing difficult, painful, and shameful experiences. By not rushing tribal clients to get therapy completed within 12 weeks, it provided me the opportunity to get to know my clients through their culture. It took me about six months to fully understand the Seminole culture, based on my clients educating me about their values and belief system. Therapy became a process of joining with tribal clients. Tribal clients felt comfortable and not rushed to get “fixed” so easily.

Overall, the concept of “time” may be generalized to working with all other human beings in order to provide clients an opportunity to process, instead of rushing through their painful experiences. Slowing down the process of therapy, illustrates a concept of not rushing to fix things and moving on to the next issue with clients. Tribal clients can take up to months to disclose any form of information in therapy, which can also relate to the outside population. It is significant for therapist to be mindful about their clients’ needs instead of focusing on completing a checklist with clients. Human beings need to feel comfortable in a therapeutic relationship in order to share any intimate information with a therapist.

The concept of “time” provided me an opportunity to connect and join with my tribal clients. I was able to build relationships with my tribal clients in order for them to be able to share about their personal life experiences. Therapists need to remain mindful about the concept of “time” when working with clients from different cultures. Based on my findings, therapy is all

about building relationships and having the opportunity to join and connect with clients from a non-expert stance.

Tribal clients educated me on the process of taking time and not rushing them in therapy. For example, some of my tribal clients informed me that they are not open to receiving prescribed medication to “cure” them. They feel that the professional wants to rush the process of getting to know them by medicating them. One of my clients expressed his concerns about the “white world” approach with tribal clients. He informed me that the “white world” does not care about helping people because they are focused on getting clients on medication. He expressed that when medication is prescribed, the professional is not attempting to get to know the client at a deeper level. His statement was helpful for me to provide therapy services to my clients because I wanted for them to feel comfortable and open to the process of therapy. I did not want to rush my clients to solve their problems and move to the next problem because I was on their “time.”

#### *Directions for Future Study*

This ethnography attempted to address the overall inadequacy in the literature relevant to the role of a therapist joining and connecting with Seminole Tribal members and understanding the Seminole culture in order to be effective therapist. Other therapists should consider exploring how to connect with tribal members who are not in a substance abuse setting to help fill the remaining gap in the literature. Therapists should also consider identifying tools that may be effective when working with tribal children and adolescents. This study opens up other topics not yet studied. For example, the phenomenon of a male therapist working with tribal clients. It would be interesting to explore how tribal clients respond to male therapists. This study has opened up a small doorway to become effective when working with tribal clients, however,

because “time” plays a significant role in therapy, it will be helpful to spend another two years with tribal clients to receive in depth of knowledge about how to approach the younger generations within the tribe. Because the cultural values are slowly fading away, it would be interesting to explore what the younger tribal generations think about the concept of therapy.

#### *Personal Remarks*

This research study has many implications to the field. As a researcher, I have gained a great deal from this experience with the Seminole Tribal clients. Upon completing this study, I have gained appreciation for the Seminole Tribe of Florida. I did not know anything about the tribe prior to working with tribal clients. Having the opportunity to get invited by my clients to navigate a foreign system has allowed me to feel grateful. This study has increased my appetite to learn more about the Seminole culture in a non-threatening manner. As a researcher, I plan to publish the results of my findings in either a book or journal articles. I hope to provide the field a manual to guide therapists on how to join and connect with Seminole clients. I believe that the data will add a great deal to the literature in the process of therapy with not only the Seminole Tribe, but also foreign systems.

I would like to thank Dr. Burnett for all his support and guidance. Dr. Burnett gave me an opportunity to follow my passion and illustrate my genuine being with Seminole clients. This project was well worth the time and effort I invested.

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## Appendix A

## Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled

*How Does a Family Therapist Navigate a Foreign System (Seminole Tribe of Florida): An Ethnographic Study*

Funding Source: None

IRB protocol #

Principal investigator:

Sunny N. Khachatryan, M.S.

19380 Collins Ave. #712

Sunny Isles Beach, FL 33160

(305) 742-5429

Co-Investigator:

Christopher F. Burnett, Psy. D.

3301 College Ave.

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314

(954) 262-3010

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:

Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790

IRB@nsu.nova.edu

**What is the study about?**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The nature of this research is describing the culture of the Seminole Tribe, and how that culture influences my work as a family therapist in the context of the tribe. The researcher's goal is to illuminate some aspects of Seminole Tribal culture as it relates to working with them as a family therapist.

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Why are you asking me?**

I am inviting you to participate because you are tribal member in recovery of substance abuse who has insight on how therapist may navigate a foreign system (Seminole Tribe of Florida). There will be 2 participants in this research study that the researcher knows.

### **What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?**

You will be interviewed by the researcher, Ms. Khachatryan. Ms. Khachatryan will ask you questions about family therapist working with tribal members. Also you will be asked what a family therapist may do to get invited to navigate a foreign system like the Seminole Tribe. The interview will last approximately 20 minutes.

### **Is there any audio or video recording?**

This research project will include audio recording of the interview. This audio recording will be available to be heard by the researcher, Ms. Khachatryan, personnel from the IRB, and the dissertation chair, Dr. Christopher Burnett. The recording will be transcribed by Ms. Khachatryan. Ms. Khachatryan will use earphones while transcribing the interviews to guard your privacy. The recording will be kept securely in Ms. Khachatryan's home office in a safe cabinet. The recording will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study. The recording will be destroyed after that time by deleting the digital recordings. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described in this paragraph.

### **What are the dangers to me?**

Risk to your minimal meaning they are not thought to be greater than other risks you experience every day. Being digitally audio recorded means that confidentiality cannot be promised. If you have questions about the research, your research rights, or if you experience an injury because of the research please contact Ms. Khachatryan at

(305) 742-5429. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions about your research rights.

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?**

There are no benefits to you for participating.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

The transcripts of the digital recordings will not have any information that could be linked to you. Pseudonyms will be used in the process of transcription. As mentioned, the digital recordings will be destroyed 36 months after the study ends. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The IRB, regulatory agencies, or Dr. Burnett may review research records

**What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services you have a right to receive. If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

**Other Considerations:**

If the researchers learn anything which might change your mind about being involved, you will be told of this information.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing below, you indicate that

- this study has been explained to you
  - you have read this document or it has been read to you
  - your questions about this research study have been answered
  - you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
  - you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
  - you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled How Does a Family Therapist Navigate a Foreign System (Seminole Tribe of Florida): An Ethnographic Study

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Biographical Sketch

Sunny Khachatryan was born in Yerevan, Armenia and lived there until she was eight years old. She grew up in the United States, where she completed her education. Sunny completed her undergraduate studies in Psychology at San Diego State University and graduate studies in a dual program, Clinical Mental Health Counseling and Marital, Couple, Family Counseling at Barry University. Sunny is a Licensed mental Health Counselor, Certified Addiction Professional, and Certified Grief Recovery Specialist. Sunny's clinical experience includes working with the substance abuse population in residential settings and intensive outpatient settings providing services to adults and adolescents with substance abuse disorders and mental health disorders. Sunny has also worked with severely emotionally disturbed children and children with autism.